

JESUS SAVES; WE'RE CALLED TO INVEST

Sermon, November 13, 2011

Stewardship Sunday

Texts: I Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30

There was a very cautious man who never laughed or played
He never risked, he never tried, he never sang or prayed.
And when one day he passed away, his insurance was denied
For since he never really lived ... they claimed he never died.

The parable today tells us about one such very cautious man, a man who didn't like to take risks ... a man afraid to take risks, a man afraid to fail. According to our Gospel lesson, though, failure is not defined as making mistakes. Nor is failure defined in our Gospel reading as falling short. Nor is failure defined as not "making it." According to this parable, failure is defined as breaking even ... failure is not doing anything at all with what you have.

In honor of Veterans Day, I like the story about a young man who enlisted in the 82nd Airborne. He was about to be assigned to their jump school, so he eagerly asked the recruiter what to expect at jump school. "Well," the recruiter said, "it's three weeks long." After a pause, the young soldier asked, "OK, what else?" The recruiter replied, "The first week they separate the men from the boys. The second week, they separate the men from the fools." Again, a pause. The recruit asked, "And the third week?" "The third week," the recruiter said with a grin, "the fools jump."

Yes, the 82nd Airborne wants fools who will take the risks. "Fools" who will put their training and their skills and their talent into use! By the way, it's such "fools" who also go on to gain the glory. By contrast, a story is told about the French Army 1956 campaign to recruit their own paratrooper divisions; up until this time, France did not have a paratrooper division. On one of the busiest streets in Paris they placed their poster, which read: "*Young Men! Join the paratroopers of France. It is more dangerous to cross this street than to jump with a parachute!*" Someone scribbled this message at the bottom: "*I would gladly join, but the recruiting office is on the other side of the street!*"

Again, in today's Gospel we are told of a man who didn't like risk, a man who was afraid to fail. In this story of Jesus the master comes twice, first to give his servants a trust, and second to see what they did with it. He is planning to go away for a long time and entrusts a huge fortune to three of his most trusted servants. A talent was worth six thousand denarii. One denarius was the daily wage of a laborer. It would take a laborer about twenty years working six days a week to earn just one talent. The sums in this parable are huge! One servant is given the equivalent of a century's wages, the other four decades worth of wages, and the other two decades worth of wages.

It's not too hard to see what Jesus is getting at in this story. He is the Master who is about to leave, and He is going to come back. In the meantime, He is placing a whole lot of resources into in the hands of His disciples, resources and blessings He wants them to use. He trusts His servants as mature, responsible human beings by giving them opportunity to take initiative with His riches and says, "See what you can do with this. I'll be back." In Jesus' story, a talent is money. Lots of money, in fact. But the parable isn't just about how we use the money we are given, although it certainly includes that. The word "talent" has a double entendre in English, it can stand for whatever gift or skill or riches God has invested in us.

So, each of the three servants has received a huge investment of the Master's money. Jesus says that the first servant "... *went at once and put his money to work and gained five more.*" The same with the second servant, who took his two and doubled them. The words are aggressive, active. They *went out*. They *worked*, and they *gained*. It portrays two servants who jumped on the Master's investment with zest and commitment. What is pictured in this parable is the time between the Master's leaving and the Master's eventual return. This period is not to be spent passively waiting around, nor is it characterized by merely inward spiritual pursuits. This critical period is a time to work with speed and zest; it is a time to be actively engaged in what can be risky ventures. *The Master wants something done with His goods*. He wants the lost found, He wants the hungry fed, He wants the poor helped, He wants the unloved loved, He wants the children raised in wisdom as well as stature; in short, He wants God's Kingdom to be advanced in all areas of life; and these two represent those who get out and *do* it.

Now we come to that third servant, the one who went out and buried the money in the ground. Now, in fairness to him, we have to remember there was no FDIC insurance. It was far from a risk-free investment to even open a savings account. In those days, it was quite common to bury money. Some would consider it the prudent thing to do, especially with someone else's money. Jesus pictures a servant whose most important overriding consideration was

safety. This is the kind of man who probably wore suspenders *and* a belt; he was not going to take any chances on anything of value being exposed. He wanted to take no risks. He took the money and put it in a hole. He did not put the money in drive; he put it in park. He took what belonged to the Master and buried it. He kept it safe.

However, even burying money in the ground is risky. As Jesus said earlier: *"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."* You could bury treasure in the ground and it could rust. Or, if you're like me, you could forget where you buried it. Or, someone might see you bury the treasure and wait until you were not around and dig it up for themselves. There is no way in this world to avoid risk. When you love someone, you are taking a risk. When you have a child, you are taking a risk (*when you have three children, you're really taking a risk!*). When you decide on an occupation, you are taking a risk. You can't avoid risk without seriously stunting your life.

Verse 19, "And after a long time the Master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them." The first two are so happy to see their returning Master, and they are enthusiastic. *"Master, you entrusted me with five talents (or two). See, I have gained more!"* They are eager, even giddily so, to see their Master and to show them how they have used his trust. These servants feel good, they are proud of their work, and it has been great fun for them to see their Master's investment grow. The Master responds to the enthusiasm of the servants. "Well done, good and faithful servants!" They have shown themselves trustworthy, and we are told they are given even greater trust, greater responsibility, and a greater share of the Master's happiness. When we are faithful in investing what we've been given, or in putting to work what we are gifted to do, we are given even greater trust, greater responsibility, a greater share of the Master's happiness. Faithfulness in what God has entrusted to us gets us even deeper into the mission and the joy of the Kingdom.

The third servant then comes up to the Master, probably still brushing the dirt off of his talent. "Master, I knew that you were a hard man. So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you." Now, he didn't receive as much as the others had received, and he was panicked about losing what "little" he thought he had, so he buried it in the ground. When the master returned, that servant gave the money back, proud he had *not* taken risks with it. But to his probable surprise, he was judged harshly. Now, isn't being cautious good? Well, not when one is so cautious that one does *nothing at all*. The Master in the parable condemns such "caution" for what it is ... *laziness*. But isn't prudence a virtue, especially when investments can be so risky? Not when prudence turns into selfish, self-centered ... even wicked ... hoarding at the expense of helping others.

This last servant took the Master to be a hard and demanding man to be feared, even though the Master was generous enough to entrust twenty years' wages into his hands. He only judges his Master to be hard and exacting, a man only interested in punishing failure. What he does with the money he is given displays he doesn't really know and understand the Master at all. The fear of God, says the Bible, is the beginning of wisdom. But there is a dysfunctional fear of God, portrayed by this third servant. There is the healthy fear, which is reverence; there is the unhealthy fear, which just does not trust God at all. This fear is really faithlessness, which expresses itself in the unwillingness to take risks and put to work what the Master has given you. This is the faithless fear that will only cause you to hoard what you have ... to bury your gifts, your potential, your talent ... in a hole.

Another very human tendency is on display, here, and that is the tendency to think that our little bit doesn't count. Maybe this one-talented servant thought he was less talented, less "gifted", than the others. Maybe some of us may think we aren't as gifted as others, maybe we think we cannot do what others do or we cannot give what others give, and because we think we can't do what someone else can do, or give what someone else gives, we can actually wind up doing nothing or giving nothing at all! But it's not how much we are given that's key, it is our willingness to put to use what God has entrusted to us. The man with two talents who invests them gets just as much of a pat on the back as the one with five. The Master wants us to take what we have been given, no matter how small it may seem to us, and use it, risk it, put it to work, not bury it and sit on it!

And I guarantee you that it's the risk takers who are having all the fun, it's the risk takers who are sharing in the Master's happiness, it's the risk takers who are growing in faith and experiencing God's pleasure! Those who are making something of the investment God placed in them are the ones who are experiencing the sheer pleasure and blessing of seeing God at work, both in and through them. God delights in seeing a profit on His gracious investment.

We are given financial and spiritual talent, the spiritual capital of faith, hope and love, to invest in the world around us. And in the gracious economy of God, when you faithfully invest your God-given talents, whatever they may be, not only do you keep them when you use them, you actually gain more.

Don't bury what God has given you. Put it to use! Good use. God and the 82nd Airborne delight in fools who will take the risks; jump out and invest the skills, training and blessings you've been given!