

Sermon “Learning to Let Go”
Kirk of St James
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Every three years this parable in Matthew shows up in the lectionary readings, and every three years I am left feeling uncertain of how to best approach it. I don't know about you but if I were a character in this story, I would be the third servant—the one that is the lesson in this story, the one we should not try to emulate. When becoming a minister in the PCC you have to take part in what is called guidance conference. And while there different counsellors and people interview you, there is testing and a number of other components. And I will never forget when one of the people interviewing me remarked “you like to have all your ducks in a row.” She implied that I was a planner and did not make moves quickly which is true. I spend a lot of time in discernment when I make big decisions, it is who I am. However, passages like today remind us of the importance of taking leaps of faith when called to.

Theologian N.T Wright once wrote that there is always a danger that people will regard Christianity as a kind of heavenly examination system. He likens it to exams in school. "God has given us a syllabus to study, things to learn and do, rules to keep. One day he'll come and set the final examination and see who passes and who fails. Maybe there will be especially good things in store for people who get especially good marks, and likewise especially bad things for people with bad marks." After reading a parable like this today we wonder if perhaps that is in fact true. However, a complete reading of the gospel refutes an interpretation like this. We know that Jesus came to bring the good news, to heal, and to seek the lost. This parable was not a test for the servant in the traditional way we understand a test. Rather it was meant to encourage the servant to more fully engage in life.

In this passage Jesus is nearing the end of his life. He is in the middle of his own high-risk gamble. He has made the decision to leave the safety of Galilee and travel to Jerusalem, where he will

surely encounter trouble with the religious authorities. He has left everything behind for this final journey. On his way to Jerusalem he is preparing his disciples for when he will no longer be with them. He will be leaving them with tasks to do, and the continuance of his ministry rests with them. This is where the parable of the talents is reframed--Jesus cannot afford to have them bury the good news. The disciples must go out into the world as best they can to share the gospel with others. They cannot let fear deter them. That is both fear of the world, and fear of doing it wrong. What would have happened if the disciples had felt they simply did not understand the message of Jesus well enough and therefore, they could not share what they had been taught? What if they had been afraid of the religious and political leaders who had just crucified their friend, so they remained locked in an Upper Room reminiscing about how great Jesus was but, doing nothing with his teaching?

The first two servants go out and without any concerns make their investments. They understand the master well enough to know that even if their ventures fail, they have at least faithfully tried. As John P. Meier observes, what the Lord values is not one's accomplishments in a quantitative sense but the fidelity of one's commitment, as mirrored in one's whole-hearted activity." The third slave does not understand the master, and fears what will happen if he loses. So, he was a prudent, cautious investor who carefully put everything aside and waited. When the master returns the servant is able to say "Look, here it is, every penny safe and sound." The third servant did not understand the master. Jesus has denounced the Pharisees and scribes' numerous times before, and this passage closely follows those rebukes. It is a safe interpretation of this passage to look upon the third servant as the scribes and Pharisees who have the treasure of God's word but do not use it. They know the Lord, yet do not act as if they do.

One writer beautifully summed up this passage with the following words "The point here is not really about doubling your money and accumulating wealth. It is about living. It is about investing. It

is about taking risks. It is about Jesus himself and what he has done and what is about to happen to him. Mostly it is about what he hopes and expects of them after he is gone. It is about being a follower of Jesus and what it means to be faithful to him, and so, finally, it is about you and me. The greatest risk of all, it turns out, is not to risk anything, not to care deeply and profoundly enough about anything to invest deeply, to give your heart away and in the process risk everything. The greatest risk of all, it turns out, is to play it safe, to live cautiously and prudently." Through that lens the harsh rebuke of the third servant finally makes sense.

Paul has a line that is essentially the motto of my life, he wrote in Romans "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do." How true is that in our lives? We are apt to hold onto the talent given even when we know we shouldn't. We have a sense of what we should be doing yet we hesitate. "We bury too much goodness, time, love, treasure, and talent in the ground." You may have heard on BBC news this week of a significant archeological discovery. Musket balls believed to have been part of a supply of weapons for Bonnie Prince Charlie have been found. Amateur archaeologists made the discovery while trying to find armaments sent from France. The arms arrived too late to help the prince. They were sent as part of his doomed attempt to defeat government forces as part of the 1745 Jacobite rebellion. The hoard included 215 musket balls, coins, and gilt buttons. They are believed to be part of an arms shipment landed in Lochaber two weeks after Bonnie Prince Charlie's forces were defeated at Culloden. Too late to do anything they were simply hidden. How many times do we bury our treasures, or as in this case hang on like the third servant until it is too late to do anything?

Why do we hide our talents? Maybe some of us feel that our talent is too small to share. Perhaps we wish we had another's talent instead of our own and we find ourselves thinking "if I only

had theirs it would be so much easier." In the parable today it was the servant's fear of the master that paralyzed them. Even though the master freely entrusted them with fifteen years worth of a labourers pay, they did not trust him. If the master was worried about losing it, He would not have given it. Instead the master wanted to see them flourish in some way, not hide in fear.

The heart of this passage is not about money or who made the most. It was about faithfulness. Jesus calls us to be his disciples, to live out our lives as fully as possible, to take risks, and expand the horizons of our responsibility. It is about the use and investment of these precious lives of ours, and to be bold and brave, to reach high, and care deeply. "This parable is the invitation to the adventure of faith--the high-risk venture of being a disciple of Jesus Christ." God reminds us not to be afraid, but rather to take risks for His sake. Sometimes they will work and sometimes they will fall through but, that is okay. This is not about doing things perfectly; it is about commitment. I would encourage all of us as the advent season quickly approaches to consider what your talents are, to look at how you are using them, and encourage you to take risks, and live boldly and bravely while you answer God's call in your life.