

Risky Business      Matthew 25:14-30

I didn't really want to preach  
on the parable of the talents.

Usually our first thought when it comes to talents,  
is *yes, we get it*,  
we need to use our talents wisely,  
which of course means  
we need to use *our money wisely*.

My general feeling (*and probably yours too*)  
is that we've had our fill  
of stewardship sermons  
for the short term. Ahem.

And you know another thing,  
I have never really liked  
how this parable ended.  
Probably because it seems to me  
that it wasn't all that bad of an idea  
to bury that one talent.

That was a common practice back then,  
taking care of, making sure,  
that your money was safe.

I mean, at least the slave was honest  
when the master came back—  
he could've said that he lost the talent  
and then maybe the master  
would have helped him search for it.  
I recall a wonderful story  
about sweeping the whole house  
to you find that one coin...

Or why not, here's your talent  
I watched over it,  
robbers tried to take it  
but I held fast,  
aren't you glad master that I didn't lose it?

I've always thought the punishment  
for the servant who hid his talent in the ground  
was so harsh,  
so over the top,  
so exaggerated.

How exactly is this  
like the kingdom of heaven, Lord?  
Where one risk that isn't taken,  
where playing it safe  
results in being thrown out  
where it is dark and people are weeping  
and gnashing their teeth...

Nope, I just don't like this parable.  
Maybe it is because I've never been  
a finance kind of person.

Did the other two servants  
take financial planning classes in college?  
They knew how to make these talents,  
this money, grow!  
Investing, playing the stakes to their advantage;  
being willing to roll that financial dice  
and would you look at that gain!  
Apparently two of them got 100% return  
on their investment.  
And truly,  
how often does that really happen?

That kind of business is too risky for me  
—makes my palms sweaty.

I'm most like that last servant;  
*(which might be why I don't like the parable)*

You see I'd plant my talent in nice clay pot,  
where I know it will get some good sun  
and I'd remember to water it occasionally;  
then I'd dig it up  
and find that it has a nice earthy patina.

But there it is;  
didn't I take good care of it Master?

Maybe some of this discomfort  
could be that this parable  
gives us an angry Jesus.

In fact most of the parables  
at the end of Matthew  
present an angry Jesus,  
which is hard to reconcile.

A parable is always  
an exaggerated story to make a point.  
Which has to mean it can't only be about  
successful returns on investment.  
In fact I think if the servant  
who had been given 5 talents  
had only been able to increase that  
by 2 % the master still  
would have been pleased.

**It isn't the amount of increase  
that overjoys the master.**

Those numbers are already so hard to believe:  
one talent was 15 years worth of wages.  
The people listening to Jesus's parable  
would have been floored  
to hear of a master who gave a servant  
5 talents, 75 years worth of a salary.

And then to hear  
that the servant doubled that  
—150 years worth of salary—  
it is so exaggerated it is incomprehensible.  
So in the story, the amount of talents  
given and then returned,  
**this is generosity can't be matched.**

So the increase that the servants create  
can't be what makes the master happy.  
It isn't a number game.

The talents have to be mirror  
for a different kind of treasure.

A treasure that can't be matched,  
**but**, a treasure that the potential to grow  
and grow exponentially.

If the parable does its job,  
then it points to something bigger than itself.  
So knowing the treasure is big,  
perhaps we can read  
the parable like this...

The kingdom of heaven is like this:

There was a man, a master,  
who was as close to God as it gets  
when it comes to extravagant generosity.  
And the master knew  
he was going on a long trip of sorts,  
a long trip where his being away  
was going to be hard on everyone.  
So he called in 3 of his closest disciples and followers  
and handed his treasure over to them.

Since he was going to be gone for a while,  
he was hoping that the 3 men  
would be able to take these talents,  
take his treasure and do something  
life changing for others.

Knowing that changing people's lives and world  
would be costly, he gave all he had  
to the those three.

To one disciple, he gave 5 talents  
or 75 years worth of treasure.  
And to another he gave 2 talents  
or 30 years worth of treasure,  
and to another he gave 1 talent,  
or 15 years worth of treasure.

He gave to each of them according to  
what he felt would be good.  
Then he was gone.

Now in due time  
this man returned and was eager to hear  
if the 3 disciples had been successful  
at doing something meaningful  
with the treasures he given them.

**Had they been willing to take  
such an enormous treasure  
and make it grow?**

Well it turns out 2 of those 3 men had!

They were wildly successful—  
it was a risky business  
to take such a treasure and make it grow,  
but it had been easier  
than they thought and they did it!

The man, the master was overjoyed!  
That is exactly what he'd hoped for  
when he'd given them all of his treasure  
and had gone away.

But that last disciple wasn't successful.  
The third man was too cautious or complacent  
—the jury is still out—  
and the third man thought the master  
was unfair in how he dealt with others  
and this treasure.  
You see the master reaped  
where he didn't sow;  
turns out it didn't matter to him  
if you were his disciple or not  
when generous treasure was concerned.

The third disciple remembered that time  
there was a man casting out demons  
in the master's name but he wasn't the master's disciple  
—and the third, overly-cautious disciple,  
remembered how the master hadn't minded at all;

saying, *that whoever wasn't against them was for them.*  
Oh yes, the master reaped  
where he didn't sow alright.

So the third disciple  
hadn't done anything with his talent,  
he'd done absolutely nothing  
with the treasure the master had given him.  
He'd buried it to be exact  
so that no one could even tell  
he'd ever been given any treasure  
at all by the master.

And when the master found out,  
he was so heart-broken and disappointed  
and rightfully so,  
upset.

The master told him,  
*you had such potential  
and you've wasted it;  
you buried my treasure in such a deep well  
that you ended up defensive and protective  
over the treasure instead of generous.*

*You think I reap where I don't sow?  
Are you upset that I am so generous?  
You did the exact opposite  
of what I'd hope you'd do with my treasure.*

Well, the third man replied,  
I saw you giving out treasure  
to every Tom, Sally and Mary!  
You were so generous to everyone  
and that made it seem to me  
that you must not care about the treasure at all  
if you were willing to be  
so over-the-top generous.

What happens when you tell me  
to give someone your treasure  
and **they just walk away?!**  
Seems like that is a complete waste!

Doesn't it make more sense  
to just hold on to it,  
when you know I'll take good care  
of the treasure;  
when you know  
I can be trusted with the treasure?  
Besides, you didn't give us any parameters  
on how to handle it  
when the treasure got out of hand!

The master looked at that third man  
and said, *but if you had been willing  
to see that the treasure is mine to give  
and yours to share,  
you would have had a much fuller life.*  
*If you had really looked at my treasure,  
instead of burying it,  
you would have seen that it is  
by its very nature, meant to be shared.*

*Instead, now you're just someone  
who buried the treasure and kept it to yourself,  
which made you lonely  
and cold-hearted,  
it made you cautious and suspicious  
and it made you unhappy  
**instead of full of life.***

The parable was never about success.  
But perhaps always about the treasure;  
the gospel, the world changing treasure;  
the good news that in Christ,  
God is extravagantly generous.

Being given a talent,  
knowing any fraction of Christ's gospel  
means that we'll be willing  
to risk the good news of life transformation  
on any and everyone of God's people;  
which sounds pretty risky.

And I know that some of us  
don't feel quite like risk takers.

The message of this parable says  
we do our selves *in for some weeping  
and gnashing of teeth,  
and lonely, dark nights*  
if we aren't willing to risk  
for God's people in God-given generous ways.

The success isn't the concern,  
but the effort, the willingness to risk  
—that is what this master is about;  
an unstable, uncertain, risky business.

Another story.

Back in 1876,  
Johanna (a little girl of ten)  
was placed in an almshouse  
in Tewksbury, Massachusetts.  
Johanna's mother had died,  
and not long afterward,  
her abusive father deserted the family.

Johanna was wild and ungovernable,  
and she was nearly blind  
from a childhood eye infection.  
Her poor vision made reading impossible,  
limiting her formal education.  
In the almshouse,  
she learned lessons in self-sufficiency  
but little else.

There would appear to have been  
little hope for this girl.

However, after a few years,  
a young woman named Maggie  
came to the almshouse.

Maggie took an interest in Johanna  
and took her under her wing.

[Johanna says,] Maggie,

"moved in the blackness of the almshouse like sunlight."

Maggie grew flowers in her room.

Maggie protected Johanna  
and the other vulnerable little girls.

Maggie taught Johanna  
that while she was not responsible  
for having been left in the almshouse,  
she was responsible for the state of her spirit,  
wherever she was.

Maggie was a young woman of devoted and generous faith.

Eventually, Johanna learned  
about the Perkins School for the Blind in Boston  
and convinced the almshouse overseers  
to send her there.

She enrolled in 1880,  
and though her rough manners  
made the going tough at first,  
she persevered and graduated in 1886,  
as valedictorian of her class.

After graduation, the director of Perkins School  
recommended Johanna,  
who was usually known by her nickname, Anne,  
for her first job.

It would be quite a challenge.  
She was sent to Tuscumbia, Alabama  
to be teacher and governess  
to a seven-year-old blind and deaf girl  
named Helen Keller.

This newly certified teacher, Anne Sullivan,  
knew about blindness, anger, and fear  
through the hardships of her life.

But she also knew about grace and redemption  
and [the risk] to live [generously]  
because of the love of Maggie Hogan  
who made the grim reality of an almshouse life  
bearable and even hopeful  
for children.

And so, Anne Sullivan  
began opening a new world to Helen Keller,  
who eventually authored twelve books,  
was a leader in the women's suffrage movement,  
and was one of the first advocates  
for the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Now, most of us know something  
about the remarkable achievements of Helen Keller.  
And most of us know the story  
of her life-long, devoted friend and teacher,  
Anne Sullivan.

But how many of us knew  
about Maggie Hogan?<sup>1</sup>

Friends, even if we are given just one talent,  
we have to take the risk  
of being generous  
—because we could be a Maggie Hogan.  
If Maggie had buried the treasure,  
if she had decided that this little girl named Johanna  
was too unruly to love,  
too far gone to encourage,  
then surely the story could have ended  
in darkness, weeping and gnashing of teeth.

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<sup>1</sup> this story was taken from the sermon by Rev. Dr. Casey Baggott, Making It Matter; found on  
<http://day1.org/8027-casey-baggott-making-it-matter>

Isn't that the message?

We can't know

what giving others the treasure will do;

we can't know

how giving others the good news might end up

—we can't know

the gain or success or even failure.

It isn't ours to know

and it never has been.

What is ours to know,

is when we crack this parable open

we learn that it points

to a God who is more generous

than we can imagine or comprehend,

and we are invited and given

the good news to be as generous

as God with it.

To risk the good news on and with others.

To live lives that can take a the gospel

to 75 people

and watch it become 150 people.

Or maybe it won't.

Maybe it will just blossom to 30,

or yield nothing at all.

That is of course the risky business

of generosity with this treasure.

Most of us think that risk taking

is all about the results

it produces.

But I think this parable tells us

that if we are willing to take the risk,

then we can leave the rest to the Master.

It seems God is willing  
to risk being generous on us,  
and if we want to live in new life,  
then we'll have to dig up our talent  
and share it, even if it has a slight patina to it.