

Matthew 25:14-30

the God who risks everything

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The parables of Jesus are teaching stories. They are not allegories. What's the difference, you ask? Allegories are filled with characters that represent someone else. The servants are disciples, the landowner God, for instance. Parables on the other hand are stories told that are not so tightly bound to characters outside the story. They are less abstract but no less designed to provoke insight and action. Jesus is well known for these stories whose intent is to **shock** the listeners into a new way of thinking and living.

Let's take this one for instance. My first question is always "**what's going on here?**"

The story is straightforward - and I would add, outlandish from the beginning. A landowner goes away and leaves extravagant amounts of money for three servants. Traditional translations say he gave five to one, two to another and 1 to the last. Our translation is more accurate: 5,000, 2,000 and 1,000 gold coins. In other words, this is an astonishing **risk** for the landowner. Whatever you may think of him later at this point in the story, we know he has taken an enormous **risk** giving so much to each servant, including the one who received the least amount of money. I want us to focus on is the **risk**, more than the money. I want us to think beyond the annual pledge Sunday sermon where this usually lands in preacher's hands.

What's going on here?

Each of these people has been given something with the implicit understanding that each will do something with it. Isn't this very much the way it is with our lives? I note here that the servants did not ask for anything - they only receive what is given. Which is to say there is an element of grace here, right? Along with an unstated invitation to do something with what has been given. So at this point you might ask yourself - ***what have I been given?***

In an extraordinary essay on this story, Frederick Buechner speaks about the stewardship of pain. He arrived at his insight when a man at a conference said to him: "you have had a great deal of pain in your life and have been a good steward of it." Buechner said: "I did not hear his words as a compliment, although I suppose that is the way he meant them. I had always thought of stewardship as a rather boring,

churchy word that the minister trouts on Every Member Canvass day. But then I wondered: what did it mean to take care of, take care with, the hurtful things that happen to you. How do you go about being the steward of, of all things, your pain?"

What is remarkable about this parable - complete with its harsh, dark ending - is the givenness of things beyond our control, including our lives which for each of us is always mixture of good and bad, joy and sorrow, unexpected things that appear as good luck or bad luck. One person wins the lottery, another losing everything. Buechner asks, "To use the mercenary terms of the parable itself, how do we get the most out of what we are so variously, and richly and hair-raisingly given?"

Perhaps the fact that we are given life itself - with all the pain, sorrow and suffering of it, as well as joy, - is enough to help us understand the sad story of the third servant. Because it is likely we can identify with him on some level even if it's hard to admit out loud. He is the one who is paralyzed with fear and so buries deeply what has been given to him. We could focus for the moment, as Buechner does, on the pain that he buries so deeply. He is driven by the fear of what might happen if he risked sharing that pain, even investing it ways that might bring healing. The consequence of burying the pain - or whatever it is you has been given - is a shriveled life that is ultimately restricted by the fear of what catastrophe might happen rather than the wild possibility of goodness that can always occur when you set aside the fear for a moment.

Buechner writes, I think what the parable means is that the buried pain in particular and all the other things we tend to bury along with pain, including joy which tends to get buried too when we start burying things, that the buried life is itself darkness and weeping and gnashing of teeth and the one who throws us into it is none other than ourselves. To bury your life is to stop growing. It is to be less alive than you were to start with. That may sound harsh and unfair; but it's the way things are. It is the truth."

On the other hand, the other two servants are the ones who get it right. How? They take what is given to them and invest it; or as one translation puts it: *traded with it*. This is what coming alive looks like: faith-in-action, taking a risk with all the possibilities that you have been given. It does not mean these two servants were never afraid; likely they were. That's the nature of risk. Nor does it mean that you can live your life without being afraid at the darkness and uncertainty that comes with it. Faith is precisely the capacity to live in the darkness and uncertainty without burying the excruciating vulnerable moments. Faith-in-action means your fears do not compel

you to bury what is given, including pain or joy or whatever it is that is authentic in your life. **To be fully alive, is to bury none of it.**

We want to be sympathetic with the third servant, because we are like him at times, and he resides within us. Yet, the other two display for us a life that risks sharing what you have been given. It's only honest to note that there is no guarantee of the outcome. That is the nature of faith-in-action: it always involves risk without guarantee of success. My early teacher Fred Craddock said, *"Take account of the high risk activity of the first two servants. They doubled the money entrusted to them, hardly a possibility without running the risk of losing the original investment. ... The Christian faith - caring, giving, witnessing, trusting, loving, hoping - cannot be understood or lived without risk."*

And that brings me finally to God. It occurs to me that God is the greatest risk-taker of all. Rather than remain at a distance - safe, secure, serene - God took on flesh - your flesh and mine. In the wild exuberance of love, God risked it all in Jesus, for no other reason than we might know love and experience the joy of being a human being fully alive. He risks being a child for us. He risks welcoming the misfits and prodigals, for us. God even risks death for us. And now lives with us that we may find life abundant!

This love, this astonishing grace, this risk, my dear friends, **is** the gospel.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.