

Risky Business

24th Sunday after Pentecost

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Text: Matthew 25:14-30

I have a top 5 list of Biblical Characters who irritate me the most. By this, I mean they are the most obviously dysfunctional people in a situation or they remind me of people in my real life who just plain bug me. If I am being totally honest, they really probably bug me because they have characteristics that I hate in myself. Can anyone else relate to this or is it just me? So in no particular order, I will share with you the Biblical characters that I find most irritating. First is Martha the sister of Mary, you know the one who frantically cleans the whole house for Jesus and then passive aggressively bangs pots around in the kitchen, so that Jesus and Mary will both notice how sacrificial she's being. Then there is Adam, who throws Eve under the bus when God asks him if he ate the fruit and he points at her. IRRITATING! Am I right? Then there is a tie between the priest and the Levite who don't stop to help the attacked man by the side of the road in the story of the Good Samaritan, and then my fifth most irritating person in the Bible is the master from this story.

Now disliking the master from this story is pretty dicey, when you consider that this parable is an allegory and the master represents Jesus. But this Jesus seems so out of character compared to how we know Him from the rest of the gospels. Some of the more jarring aspects of this parable include the troubling focus to our modern sensibilities on the slave/master relationship, the fact that each of these slaves gets different amounts of talents which seems unfair, and most of all the harsh language that Jesus as the Master uses with the third slave who chooses not to invest the talents, but bury them for safe keeping. I find this unfair because the slave doesn't steal the talent and run off with it, which some have postulated could be worth anywhere between 15 years and a life's wages for a person like this. The Master calls his slave wicked, lazy, and worthless, before banishing him to a place where there is no light and where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. This sounds like a living hell. Do you see why I find the master irritating, even cruel?

Because, the Jesus we know and love is not harsh or cruel, I think we are challenged to look a little deeper as to what is going on here. Because I'm pretty sure none of you want me to preach here for an hour, I will not have time to delve into all the complicated aspects of this text. But I will say a couple of things as it regards to slavery. Slavery in the New Testament is a different paradigm than modern chattel slavery. New Testament slavery was a way servants could have a better life, not the masters. New Testament slavery was often voluntary, slaves were not tortured and it usually was not permanent. This passage is not an endorsement of slavery or any other abusive hierarchal power structure. The historical scope of scripture shows a God who is loosening chains, not tightening them.

Now, let us focus on the most troubling part of this story, the relationship between the third slave and the master.

I want to point out a few key parts of this story. First, in verse 15, it says "to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to *each according to his ability*." The divvying up of talents is not indiscriminate or biased based on the master's like or dislike of these people, it is based on the past interactions and relationship the master has with these three individuals. He gives each 5, 2, or 1 because he knows this is the amount each person is capable of managing. Just like I wouldn't be assigned the same gym workout as Arnold Schwarzeneger or The Rock, because I'm slightly less in shape than them, the slaves are given tasks according to their abilities.

Next, look at the time line here, and this is important. The master entrusts these talents and then goes away *for a long time*. He doesn't leave for a couple hours, a couple of days, or whatever time frame they are accustomed to the master being gone. He is gone much longer and these slaves have a few choices as to how to use their time. They can A) do the amount of work they usually do for him when he's away, based on the average amount of time he's gone and then chill out the rest of the time until he returns. This may or may not be what I would have done B) They use their time with urgency and preciously, not knowing if the master will be back tomorrow or many days from now. Or C), They can do the minimal amount done required to the point of doing essentially nothing and try to pass it off like this was actually in the master's best interest. So which option did the first two slaves pick? And which did the third slave pick? The third slave opts to essentially do nothing for this entire time and pass it off as if this choice was in

the master's best interest. Have you known anyone like this? Or have you done this? When I was a kid, I was the queen of "cleaning my room" by throwing all of my toys under my bed, in my closet, or even in my brother's room so I could go back to reading my book or playing with my friends as quickly as possible. If my mom busted me, I would lie to her saying "I thought that's just where all they toys went", because I was afraid of the consequences. This is essentially what the third slave has done. Burying the talent isn't keeping it safe because that was the best stewarding of the talent, it is doing the least amount of work and spinning it as if this was in the best interest of the master. That kind of excuse didn't work for my mom and it certainly doesn't fool the master.

What motivates the decision of the slave? Laziness? Yes. Procrastination? yes. But even deeper, why do people procrastinate or seem lazy? An answer is in verses 24 and 25. "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so *I was afraid*, and I went and hid your talent in the ground." Fear. Fear. Fear was what chained this slave back. Fear was the rock this person hid behind. Fear was what kept this person from taking a risk, stepping forward in faith, enjoying the fruit of his labors. Fear is what separated this slave from the other two. Not the results, not his value, not his potential, not his gifts, not his position. Succumbing to fear was the difference between a life lived in joy and celebration and a life that is a living hell.

When I was 40 years old, my life was in flux. I had been divorced for about two years, and as a result of wrestling with some personal demons and sorting through my life in therapy, I began to wonder if God was calling me to ministry. This would mean going back to school for three or four years in order to become ordained in the RCA. There was only one problem, I needed my job. I was a single parent and there was no way I could just quit work to go to school full time. So even though I did some research on Western Seminary here in Holland and my desire and longing to go into ministry grew, I just couldn't quit my job and go back to school full time. I had to support my family, so seminary would have to wait until my kids graduated high school. The week I made that decision, I gave both the seminary admission officer and the pastor who was mentoring me the same snarky explanation as to why I was going against their recommendation I go to seminary: "I can't afford to go to seminary right now. But if I lose my job, I'll be sure and give you a call." Wink, wink. Well, because God apparently has the same sense of humor I do, two days later, I lost my job.

Now, while in some ways it made it obvious as to what I was to do next, my fear factor went through the roof! I had been entrusted with two wonderful kids, a mortgage, health benefits, as many trips to Lemonjellos as I wanted, all these wonderful modern day talents. Could I really risk all of that??

While I was going through this rocky season, I was reading this life-giving book, by Dr. Brenè Brown, **The Gifts of Imperfection**. In it, there is a quote that about hit me over the head. She says, “Faith is a place of mystery, where we find the courage to believe in what we cannot see and the strength to let go of our fear of uncertainty.” Again, “Faith is a place of mystery, where we find the courage to believe in what we cannot see and the strength to let go of our fear of uncertainty.” In other words, faith is what grants us the power to let go of fear and move forward into uncertainty.

Obviously, the fact that I now stand here shows how my story worked out. Believe me, I don’t stand here as an expert of overcoming fear. For every story I have of moving through my fear, I have legions of stories of my burying my talents in the ground. But what I think this allegory challenges us today is to look at our talents and ask ourselves if we are taking enough risks with them or are we burying them and justifying it by saying its prudent and safe? I don’t think I need to tell most of you here that the Christian walk is anything but prudent and safe, and the gifts we have been entrusted with are the same. Christian life is risky, even reckless, but without moving into the risk we cannot share in the master’s joy.

What talents have we been entrusted with as individuals that we need to risk? Things like our money, resources, and abundance seems obvious. But what about those talents that are less obvious but just as risky like our identity with a political party, our stance on abortion, education or our privileges with race, sexual orientation or gender? If we hide behind these very good things, don’t they also feed our fears by keeping us from moving into areas or circles that are uncomfortable for us?

Or how about us as a church? What talents do we need to risk collectively? Is there a group who could use our beautiful new space who we fear might make that space less beautiful? Maybe yes, maybe not. Is our way of worship so important to us that we’d rather make outsiders uncomfortable rather than spending time teaching them the importance of our liturgy and traditions? Maybe

yes, maybe not. As you can see both talents and fears come in all shapes and sizes.

Now one thing this parable doesn't say is what happens if risking your talent goes totally wrong. What if the first two slaves risked their talents and blew it. I don't know too many short term investments that can double your money that also aren't incredibly risky. What if they lost all they invested or even incurred a debt? What if they invested in the ancient version of the AMC Gremlin instead of the Mustang? What if they put all their money on Betamax instead of VHS, Crystal Pepsi, or the Samsung Galaxy Note 7? It seems to me that there would be far less master's joy in which to share. Because let's be real, failure happens. Failure is inevitable.

But I wonder if the point is less on failure or success, less on the results, and more on the risking. The master's chastisement on the third slave seems pointed not so much on his results as it is on succumbing to the fear that kept him from even trying. The master says that he would be satisfied even if the slaves put the talents in savings and incurred a little bit of interest.

This is so hard for us, isn't it? What a challenge this is for our perfectionistic, results focused society. In the same book, Dr. Brown says "Perfectionism is the belief that if we live perfect, look perfect, and act perfect, we can minimize or avoid the pain of blame, judgement, and shame." We cannot let the desire to be perfect, which is a close cousin to the fear of failure keep us from taking risks. In Matthew, the master invites the slaves not to share in THEIR joy for taking a risk, but in HIS joy. This is because the results belong to the master, not us. If we don't own the joy in winning, we do not shame for failing. The loving God who lets us share in God's joy also enters in and shares in our failures.

Friends, our time on this earth is precious. Our master might return today, or a millennium from today. But each day is to be invested in the same way, because this is where the joy of being created in God's image resides. Each of us are entrusted with so many unique talents that we get to spend freely, even recklessly. Where is God's spirit convicting you to take a risk? Take a chance and share in the joy of our master.