

Matthew 25:14-30

14“For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; 15 to one he gave five talents*, to another two, to another one, *to each according to his ability*. Then he went away.

16 The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. 17 In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. 18 But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money.

19 *After a long time* the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them.

20 Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.’ 21 His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’

22 And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.’ 23 His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’

24 Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; 25 so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’

26 But his master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? 27 Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. 28 So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents.

29 For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. 30 As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

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The slaves had no choice. Their master had commanded them. He trusted his slaves to take care of his money. And they all did, each one in his own way. Two of the slaves took risks, they could have lost it all and, because they all knew that the master was, “a harsh man, reaping where he did not sow, and gathering where he did not scatter seed,” they knew that the risk was doubled, because if they did not produce a profit for their master,

they would bear his wrath.

The third slave, some would say was prudent. He believed that being a good steward of his master's resources meant taking care of the money and not exposing it to the ups and downs of the market. He put it in a safe place and got on with his life. He might have envied the other two slaves who had risked losing the master's wealth, especially when it looked like they would turn a profit. But it is more likely that he was critical of their unfaithfulness. To his mind, risking the master's wealth was responsible. After all, the master had "entrusted" his resources to the slaves.

Since I've read the entire story to you, and since you've heard the story before, probably a dozen or more times, you know how it ends and it is not a pleasant experience for our friend who had sequestered the money in a safe place.

But I submit that despite that, he is the one whose behavior the church copies the most. We use words like prudent, or a phrase like "responsible stewardship" as we walk off to that secret place with our bag of resources tied up in a sack, and shovels perched on our shoulders.

And it's an odd thing. We want to identify with the two lucky winners, the risk takers, but deep within is something, well, I'll just say it like it is, fear-- that makes us want to sink that spade into the soft earth and hide that money until the master comes back so we can give it to him-- no gain, but more importantly-- no loss either, and we can stand with confidence before him, talent in hand, and tell him why we chose not to take the risk, because we were afraid.

I have to tell you that one of the great things about you and your leadership is your willingness to do the opposite. It hasn't been ten years, but it's getting close, a young man approached us seeking our support. He believed that he had been called to ministry. What's the risk, you ask? The young man's name is Richard Lindsay, and you know some of his story, especially the controversial part, the part about his sexual orientation. If session had decided to bury the talent in the ground, chose the safer option, we might have politely told him about certain confessional standards, various rulings by General Assembly, wished him good luck, and sent him on his way. It would have broken his heart, but the talent was secured.

Richard had come to us asking to be affirmed, blessed by us, even though it appeared that God had played a cruel trick on him. Somehow session realized that it was no trick at all. It was a sign, and the situation demanded blessing. This was no mere request it was a demand, by God, that we take the risk, invest the talents, to be an agent of God's blessing and by a nearly unanimous vote (it would be too good a story if the vote had been unanimous) the session affirmed that call and gave Richard our blessing. Now the session members did that knowing that this would not make everybody in the church happy. For some of our members the issue was not one of to risk or not to risk, it was for them a matter of how they understood scripture, and whether or not we were being faithful to God's Word.

Despite that, session voted its blessing and Richard officially began his journey toward ordination as a pastor in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Today Richard has nearly completed the requirements for his doctorate in Homiletics at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California.

Thirty or more years ago when I was pastor of a church in suburban Louisville and the country was trying to purge the guilt of our adventures in southeast Asia, thousands of refugees were allowed to enter this country from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. This church of about 200 members was advised of the need for sponsors for these people. Without sponsors, they could not come to the US. There were some at that church who believed that the smart money should be put in a carefully dug and well concealed hole in the ground. After all, why should we get involved; 60,000 dead GIs seemed enough of a price to pay, and we might even be giving aid and comfort to a former enemy.

Criticisms were vocal. Loudly vocal. They warned of the effect of refugee sponsorship on the church. We were advised of what “some people” were saying; about how those selfsame people might “leave the church.” It is the mantra of those who carry a shovel. It is all about risk avoidance. Here, put that talent in this hole in the ground!

But what good is a buried talent?

Session voted to sponsor a family. On the day they were to arrive, thirty members of the congregation were at the airport to meet this man and his two children. They spoke no English, and of course we spoke no Laotian. Three months later another family composed of a woman and her two children arrived. We had nothing to do with that, but it soon became apparent that our original family was about to double in size. They wanted to be married.

I performed the ceremony on Valentine’s Day in 1981 with a Laotian interpreter. It turned out that the man, his name was Oudone, would spend 25 years, the rest of his life in the United States, married to Souvanny the same woman all that time. They had become Christians, joined the church, and became part of what would become arguably the most unique Presbyterian Church in Louisville, because you see, the congregation was about investment and risk and soon there were people from Latin America worshipping there, people from Somalia and the Sudan found a home there, along with still others from other countries. The place looked like the United Nations last time I was there with the people all worshipping and praising God.

How would things have been different if the session of that church had not refused to the security of a hole in the ground?

Remember that in the scripture lesson it was said of the master that he was, “a harsh man, reaping where he did not sow, and gathering where he did not scatter seed.” It occurred to me that there are two ways, well, at least two ways to interpret that. The master is probably Master with a capital M and the story is all about judgment, blessing the risk takers while condemning the man who thought he had done the right thing by securing the money entrusted to him.

But it could just as easily be me, or you. While it may well be that in the end we will appear before the Master (capital M) for judgment with respect to how we handled the resources that have been entrusted to us. But before that we will have to contend with that part of ourselves that will judge us; for who can be harder on me than me, or you than you? Of course taking risk assumes the possibility of loss, otherwise there would be no risk, but as wise man once said, "Not to act is to act."

We can deny and pretend for so long, but in the end all of that pretense and denial melts away and we are left with our regrets and sorrows and a litany of "what-ifs" an odd reward for people who believed that by digging a hole and securing the master's gifts, we would most likely fond favor, and ironically, by doing little or nothing, we would earn a great reward.

The gospel bears no witness to that sort of thinking. And when in the future we find ourselves in meetings, I pray that we will all be able to recognize the words of the third servant and flee from them. Flee into the arms of Jesus.

RISK-- JESUS TOOK RISKS AND ENDED UP ON A CROSS

*INVESTMENT
I AM/YOU ARE OUR OWN RICH MAN*