

“Claiming Our Choices and Power”

Although my reasons for doing so have varied over the years, I have never liked this parable.

Some of the things particularly jumping out at me this time around include these three facts as portrayed in Jesus’ story:

First, none of the slaves lost any of the principal their owner entrusted to their management.

Second, none of the otherwise unpaid laborers used the funds entrusted to their stewardship to escape from their enslavement.

And third, in their owner’s absence, all three slaves stayed and at a minimum maintained the talent or talents entrusted to their care.

To us it sounds like each in their own ways was faithful in at least preserving what had been entrusted to them.

It’s also notable that in the parable the owner didn’t give any instructions to the slaves about what to do with the funds.

Although we’re not told exactly what the phrase *“according to his ability”* referred to, the management of the funds was left to each of their own initiative.

To give you some perspective on the kinds of funds we’re talking about, depending on the interpreter, a *“talent”* in Jesus’ day represented between 15 and 30 years of an average laborer’s wages – perhaps as much as a quarter of a million dollars per talent.

That means the first slave received about \$1.25 million, the second slave received about \$500,000, and the third slave received only a measly \$250,000.

So, we’re talking about a lot of money **AND** a lot of trust!

Each slave had real choices and power.

Yet not **ONE** of them ran off with their owner's money.

Sure, the first two invested – apparently, **“according to his ability”** – what they received, each doubling their owner's principal to let's say \$2.5 million and \$1 million respectively.

Any of you who have investment portfolios know the kinds of risk you have to take, at least in the short term, to make **DOUBLE** your principal.

What would their owner have said if they'd instead LOST it all?

“Throw them into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” perhaps?

Again, I want to point out that even after doubling their owner's money, the first two unpaid laborers didn't at least take the earnings and escape from their enslavement.

They stayed and waited for the owner to return.

Which brings us to the slave who received only one talent, only \$250,000.

That's still a lot of money even today!

Being apparently more risk-averse than his fellow slaves, the third unpaid laborer played it safe and simply buried the talent he received in the ground, ensuring it would remain wholly intact until his owner came back home.

Back in Jesus' day that was actually a wise investment strategy.

Didn't run off with the money, but instead kept it safe and secure.

Everyone in Jesus' audience would have thought the third slave had practiced wisdom.

Indeed, since investing money and earning interest was actually forbidden by Mosaic Law, at least some in Jesus' audience would have been shocked that those in his parable who did so were rewarded while the one who didn't was punished.

Perhaps some would have even wondered if Jesus was encouraging them to go and do likewise despite the Mosaic Law.

Maybe others would have silently cheered the luck of the first two but would have also applauded and appreciated the wisdom and obedience to the Law of the third.

So, what's going on that in Jesus' parable the seemingly most prudent and compliant to the Law slave receives such a harsh rebuke and punishment?

In her "Living by the Word" lectionary column for *The Christian Century* magazine LaCrosse, Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Assistant to the Bishop Libby Howe writes, "*The plain reading of the text is that the master is representative of those who are unjust in their business practices.*"

She continues, "*He does not care how the slaves make more money for him. He just wants more, and he doesn't care who knows it.*"

Rev. Howe goes on to say of the owner in Jesus' parable, "*His ways are celebrated by the world, and the 'joy' into which he welcomes his 'faithful' ones is excess wealth gained by systems that perpetuate oppression.*"

She notes, "*There is no shortage of people in the world today to compare him to, people celebrated for their ruthlessness and immorality because it has made them extraordinarily wealthy.*"

Rev. Howe adds, "*People like this are the reason Jesus could say with certainty [in the next chapter of Matthew's Gospel], 'The poor you will always have with you.'*"

That's certainly depressing and discouraging.

But what if there's an additional way to look at this parable, a more life-giving and life-affirming way to interpret it?

In this week's *The Presbyterian Outlook* magazine's "Looking into the Lectionary" column outgoing editor Jill Duffield suggests that *"It is in the practice of faith that our faith deepens and grows, [and] in turn, when we fail to exercise it atrophies and is diminished."*

Rev. Duffield continues, *"A life of faith requires taking risks for the sake of the gospel. It demands of us enough trust to let go of our talents, our gifts, our resources, to be used in service to the God who entrusted us with them."*

"It is in our letting go that we find freedom and expand our faith."

She goes on to say that *"Such risk-taking grows from trust in the God who makes us stewards and cannot be undertaken when we are afraid."*

"Fear engenders scarcity and self-protection, not generosity and creativity. Fear makes for fight or flight, not welcome and investment."

In other words, this parable teaches us several things about our Creator and stewardship of the world God has entrusted to our care.

All of us are called, according to our abilities, to step out in faith and to invest ourselves and the spiritual and material resources God has given us in the people and in the care of this world.

God's most precious gift to us, Jesus, is like the owner in this morning's parable who's gone away for a while.

Jesus will return and he'll want to know what we've done with what he's entrusted to us.

He'll want to know how we've claimed our choices and power regarding the world in which we live – how we've stewarded the soil, the trees, the rivers, the animals.

Jesus will return and want to know what we've done with the Gospel of forgiveness and eternal life.

Have we received, treasured it – and then buried it?

He'll want to know if we've used the Gospel to challenge, change and enrich the lives of people in our community.

What have we done with the lives for which Jesus died on the cross?

The owner in Jesus' parable isn't concerned about the size of the return on the slaves' investment of the talents he entrusted to their care.

He would have been satisfied with just earning simple interest.

Jesus' parable is about our stewardship attitudes, our willingness to risk managing resources according to God's agenda.

This story is telling us that to do nothing, to take no risks, to not use what our Creator has given, to not use the opportunities and the possibilities that God has provided, is sin and has real consequences.

Certainly, utilizing the gifts God has given us always means that we'll be taking risks.

We enter the unknown, and we make ourselves vulnerable.

Yet as we look around at this surging global pandemic, a president who refuses to concede the election and give needed government access to the president-elect, indeed, who continues to egg on rallies and protests by his supporters, we may well think our lives and our world are frightening and unpredictable enough as it is.

We may be thinking why would we want to take any additional risks?

Yet, this parable teaches us that taking some risks as people of faith is a good thing to do.

It's good to be a sensitive and caring listener for others, when that's among our talents.

It's good to speak out on social issues, when that's among our talents.

It's good to produce beautiful works of art, when that's among our talents.

It's good to share from our financial wealth, when that's among our talents.

Taking risks with our gifts is a good thing to do.

But even greater than that, we take risks with the gifts we've been given because it's the faithful thing to do.

We listen, we speak out, we utilize our creative talents, and we share our financial wealth because it's what our Creator had called us to do, as people of faith, who trust in God's intentions for our gifts and for our world.

We're called to risk ourselves, to make ourselves vulnerable, to risk rejection and misunderstanding, all in the name of Goodness and especially in the name of faith.

Particularly since the CARES Act unemployment benefits ran out at the end of July our food pantry has seen a fairly steady rise in the number of our weekly clients, and we set an all-time record this past Wednesday.

Times are tough for many in our community and are the hardest on people who were already struggling financially and/or living in poverty.

Every church I know including ours is having to weigh financial responsibilities with future unknowns.

In the midst of all of this, we mailed and emailed to you our 2021 financial stewardship letter and pledge card inviting you to commit a portion of your resources in the coming year to Trinity's mission and ministry.

For some, making a financial pledge is more risky than for others of us.

It's not about giving enough that together we can fund a projected budget.

That's a completely separate expression of our faith in how God is calling us to go about our mission and ministry.

I don't give to budgets; I give to expressions of God's mission and ministry in the world.

Making a financial pledge from our own resources to Trinity is a leap of faith that the God who provides us with everything we have will also continue to meet our basic needs.

I believe we're called to witness to faith in a Providing God, and one of the ways we do this is through generous and hopeful giving.

Jesus never asks stewards to do more than we can do, but he does ask us to do something.

This morning I'm inviting you to join with me in making, and if you're able, even increasing your 2021 financial pledge to Trinity Presbyterian Church.

We will be dedicating all of our 2021 financial pledges to Trinity during worship on Sunday, December 13.

Now to the One
who by the power at work within us
is able to do far more abundantly
than all we can ask or imagine,
to God be glory in the church
and in Christ Jesus
to all generations, forever and ever.
Amen.