

Proper 27
November 19, 2017
St. John's Cathedral

My father graduated from high school about a year before the great depression began and that timing had its consequences. My father – or for that matter, both of my parents who lived through that most difficult time– had a very low tolerance for risk. They were wonderful and generous people, but very cautious. I've sometimes thought that for them, the hero of today's parable from Matthew might have been the slave who dug a hole and buried his one talent in the ground for fear that he would lose it by risking it. That hole was the safest place – in his mind at least.

Of course this parable is a story about money – or at least it seems to be. It is about a man of some means who went on a journey and left three slaves in charge of his wealth in varying amounts. Five talents, two talents and one talent.

We need to know that a talent was a lot of money – a sum that it would take many years on the job – perhaps one's whole working life – to earn. It was a big number of silver coins. It was the kind of fortune you'd need to bury with a backhoe. So this was a great act of trust to hand this money over to three slaves.

Two of the slaves put the money to work – invested it well – and it multiplied. A third slave played it safe and buried his one talent in the ground where it would be safe, but not profitable.

And of course when the master returned, the two slaves who had doubled the money were praised and rewarded. But that risk-averse slave who buried the

money in the ground (not even in a low-interest savings account) – the fearful one—earned a tongue-lashing and total rejection. So much for playing it safe.

This is a parable that appears to be about money, but I think money is just a prop here. A prop that represents something very valuable. It is not about gathering up our wealth and taking it downtown for an investment conversation with someone from Charles Schwab or Merrill Lynch. It's about something much more important. It is about how we live our lives. How we manage, tend and share our resources that are both tangible and intangible.

So this is a really not a parable about money, but it is a parable about stewardship. Stewardship is about managing something we are put in charge of. In a general sense, we talk about our stewardship of the earth as we describe how we care for it.

Stewardship is a word we hear a lot in church, especially around this time of the year when really do link stewardship with money because money is one of our resources that we tend. This year we've talked about stewardship as a process of acknowledging our abundance (what God has given us) , showing our gratitude and practicing generosity. In this context it's about sharing to further the mission of the Church through the ministry of this cathedral.

We are truly grateful for all that God has given us – an abundance: our lives, our loved ones, our friends, the food on our tables, the roofs over our heads – basically everything that we have. Stewardship is also about the other kinds of gifts that we are given – the gift of being a musician, a good cook, a loving parent, an empathetic friend, a skilled carpenter. Sometimes we call those our 'talents' – those

things we do very well. Interestingly, the word 'talent' came into English and several other languages through this parable about three slaves who were asked to manage the talents of silver that their master entrusted to them.

It really isn't clear what the exact context was for Jesus when he offered this parable. Some think it might have been a response to Jewish authorities who clung to tradition and purity, could not embrace an openness to new things-- and refused Jesus' message. They were the risk-averse ones. The overly-cautious ones.

Matthew places this parable as the second of three parables toward the end of the gospel. Each of these three parables is a bit edgy. Last week we heard about the women at the wedding feast, some of whom ran out of oil for their lamps before the bridegroom arrived. Next week we will hear the parable of the last judgment when the sheep and goats are separated.

All three parables, in their own way, and with varying degrees of subtlety, point to the end of the world as we know it and to the return of Jesus in glory – a time the early church expected to come any day. We're still waiting, but still have important work to do in the meantime. All three of these parables have to do with embracing God's kingdom – they're about going 'all in' to further the kingdom. About being willing to risk for this. To embrace its values. To live its values.

These are values we discover in the gospels.—Here is a short list: Love God; love our enemies; forgive one another; renounce revenge; avoid judging or self-righteousness; befriend the outcasts; with humility, serve the poor; beware of our attachment to possessions; be just in our dealings with others. These, according to the gospels, are among the most important things. They are what Jesus taught us

and modeled for us. They are the values that we hope are embedded in our hearts and directing our actions.

Not surprisingly, I have inherited a bit of my parents' resistance to risk, even though I really grew up in a much more abundant time than they did. What challenges and encourages me, and sometimes even converts me is the witness of friends who boldly invest their lives in the work of the kingdom in important ways large and small. These are my heroes and role models. These are people who know how to invest their talents. Many of them are part of this congregation.

A friend who every week, cooks a hearty lunch for homeless women; a formerly homeless man who now looks out for the welfare of other people who are struggling; a bright college senior who postponed graduate school to volunteer as a teacher in a rural African community; a friend who helps people speak out for the rights and dignity they deserve. That's just a small slice.

Megan McKenna, in her challenging book on the parables, says that gospel parables are little stories that are like arrows that are shot into our hearts. I think that means that in some we 'hear' parables with our hearts. These parables are edgy. They are meant to get under our skin. Meant to make us squirm from time to time. We can see ourselves in those stories as we sort out what God would have us do and be. Are we that fearful slave who buries his talent in the ground? Or are we one who could take a risk and invest in the work of the Kingdom?

This parable raises the question of how we are going to invest the talent we are entrusted with. That talent, by the way is **our whole life**. How do we put it to

work for furthering God's kingdom? We are, after all, talented people in the best of ways.

So the next question, as with any parable, is how do we finish the story? How do we finish the story with our own, unique life?

How do we finish the story, emboldened by the knowledge that God loves life into us every day? How do we finish the story comforted and challenged by the abundance we have received? How do we finish the story as we are gifted with the good news that Jesus is with us, even to the end of the ages? How do we finish the story knowing that we are part of a community of faith that is here to support and encourage us?

We will finish the story. With God's help, we will finish the story.

Amen