First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

11/19/23

The Greatest Risk of All

Matthew 25:14-30 - NRSVUE

**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. At once **16**the one who had received the five talents went off 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, **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.’

When I look at this passage, my first reaction is Yikes!. It seems like the third servant; the one who appears to have acted wisely, has to bear the entire weight of his master’s fury for his prudence and caution, while at the same time, this rich master praises the two who risked losing their master’s money.

So, what’s going on here and what did Jesus have in mind when he told this parable?

 A very traditional way to look at this reading hinges on the word “talents.” God given abilities, money, and time and what we do with those things, often become the focus, here. In many churches, November is stewardship month, where folks financially pledge to support the church in the coming year. I suspect that’s the reason this passage is included in the lectionary. And, honestly, this is a valid way to look at Matthew’s words, especially when we realize that the word talent indicted a monetary measurement. In Jesus’ day, a talent was roughly $1,000.00, or about a year’s wages for a day laborer. Multiply that by two, or five, as we see in this text, and it’s a lot of money. So, the idea that this parable is all about how we use our gifts, makes sense.

But, as you may have guessed, while I see the value in a traditional interpretation of this text, I’m going to subvert that interpretation, just a bit, and take it in a different direction. Because, for me, this reading is about more than the appropriate use of talents, gifts and money.

A question this reading raises, for me at least, and maybe for you as well, is why did the master divide up his wealth the way he did? I think, perhaps, that the master split things up the way he did, because he was very aware of how the three servants would respond to the responsibility given them. And, we see this borne out, as the story progresses. Servant number one, gets five talents and servant number two gets two, while servant number three only gets one. Number one and number two, take the money and go to the local money managers and invest what they were given. Since it must have been a really good year for the stock market, they were able to double the master’s money. Quite an accomplishment, when you think about it, and when the master returns, he is extremely pleased with the results.

Number three, however, takes the one talent given to him and being very risk adverse, buries it in the ground. To put it mildly, the master is not pleased.

Now, to follow through on the traditional interpretation of this text, there’s a general understanding that the master split up his wealth the way he does because he understands that each of the servants have different skill sets and abilities. But again, looking at it through a slightly more subversive lens, we can see that this story isn’t about money or gifts or abilities at all.

Let me explain: The third servant isn’t a bad person; he’s not out to cheat his master, he’s prudent, he’s cautious, and he’s quite proud of the fact that he can give back every penny of what the master had entrusted him with, once the master has returned.

So, what’s up with the Master’s anger? Why is he so upset? I think that the answer to that question can be found in verses 24 and 25, where we read, ***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,* ***25****so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’* Basically, the servant is using his fear of the master’s anger to avoid taking any sort of risk, and blaming the master’s perceived behavior, to boot. And that, friends, is what this passage is really about; not being willing to take risks, out of fear.

I read once, that we experience God the same way we see God. If we see God as an angry, vengeful God, as the servant sees the master in this parable, then that’s how we will inevitably experience God.

How many of you remember the 70’s sitcom “Maude,” with Bea Arthur? For those who aren’t familiar with it, Maude follows the life of a very strong willed, woman who was a huge advocate of the women’s lib movement of the day. Maude was a feisty, no holds barred, take no prisoner, sort of person, and while I only saw the show in re-runs, (I’m not quite old enough to have seen it in first run!) I really loved it. Maude had one famous catch phrase she used when another character did something that she didn’t approve of. Anyone remember what that was? The phrase was, “God will get you for that.”

The belief that God is out there just waiting to “get us,” if we step off the straight and narrow, is exactly what the third servant believed and it’s exactly what kept him from being willing to take any sort of risk.

Hopefully, we have a more expansive view of the nature of God than this servant did. If we understand God to be all about love, which is my view, then taking risks to share that love with those around us isn’t really risky at all.

Here’s another phrase you may be familiar with; “Nothing ventured, nothing gained.” And we see that echoed in the master’s response to servants one and two, when the master, who in this scenario is understood to be God, tells them in verses 21 and 22, *‘Well done, good and trustworthy servant; you have been trustworthy in a few things; I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’*

Nothing ventured, nothing gained, is a pretty good description of how I got here. I don’t hold a Masters of Divinity, nor am I an ordained minister. I am what’s often referred to as a Lay Pastor. The lack of credentials, in a denomination that places a high value on an educated ordained clergy, could have legitimately barred me from being your pastor. So, it was a risk, for me to even apply, it was a risk for the Pastor Nominating Committee to call me, and it was a risk for the Presbytery to validate that call. If any party involved in the process of bringing me here, had not been willing to risk, things would have been very different.

Here’s the thing; God doesn’t call us to play it safe, when it comes to living out the Gospel. God doesn’t call us to sit on the sidelines and be afraid to take a chance. And God doesn’t call us to make excuses when we fail to act on God’s behalf. Now, obviously, that doesn’t mean that every risk we take is going to pay off. Sometimes we take risks and fall flat on our faces. But, being willing to take risks can, more often than not, lead to something much, much better.

When the Holy Spirit moves you to take a risk, know this, folks. It’s the voice of the God of love who is speaking to you. And it’s the God of love who will walk with you and delight in the journey.

So, my question to you is this: what are you willing to risk on God’s behalf?

AMEN