

“In the Economy of God...”  
March 31, 2019 (Fourth Sunday of Lent)  
St. Paul’s UCC Church  
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**Matthew 25:14-29**

[Jesus said:] "For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. 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.' 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.' 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.' 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.'

"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; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' 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? 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. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. 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.'

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In the economy of God, the only real risk is not taking a risk at all.

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Back in Jesus’ day, a question haunting so many people – probably much in the same way the question haunts today – was this: *who is God?* There are other ways to ask the question, of course: what is this God like? What is the character of God? Who is God?

Today, in Matthew 25, Jesus tells a story that captures what God might be like. The story goes like this: A certain man is leaving for a long journey to a foreign land. Before he goes, he calls three of his slaves, and entrusts all of his

property to them – to one he gives five talents, to another two talents and to another one talent. [Sidebar: it's important to know that in this story, a "talent" is not an aptitude like juggling or playing the tuba; in the first-century world, a "talent" is a unit of money – a very, very large unit of money. A single talent was worth something like 15-years' wages.<sup>1</sup>]

Anyway, the master takes his talents – all of them, apparently, all that he has – and divides them among his three slaves, to each one according to his ability. And then he dashes off to who-knows-where, and no one knows when he will return.

Here's something I find interesting in all this: the master never tells the slaves what to do with the talents. They have to figure that out for themselves. Well, the first two show great initiative. They run right out, invest what they have been given, and see some pretty serious returns on their talents. They take a big risk and it is worth it – well worth it. But the third guy – the guy who got one talent – he doesn't have the stomach for that sort of thing. He takes a far more cautious approach. He goes out, digs a hole, and buries his talent in the ground.

Eventually the master comes home: time to settle up. Both the first and second slave have doubled their money, and their master is more than pleased. He praises them with identical words: *"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."*

But of course that brings us to Mr. Bury-It-In-The-Ground. The guy who got one talent digs it up, dusts it off, hands it back to its rightful owner...and starts making excuses. It's a mess, really: he falls all over himself, half apologizing for what happened and half blaming his master for ever putting him in that position: *'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. Here, you have what is yours.'*

The master is mad. He's frustrated. He's disappointed. So he strips the third slave of his one talent and gives it to the guy who has ten.

So much for *that* investment strategy.

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I don't know about you, but my favorite slave is this guy. The third slave in this story. The first two slaves? Boring, in a teacher's pet kind of way. But the third slave, the one who doesn't get it – the one who messes up so royally, who does the wrong thing, who buries his talent in the ground – I find him much more interesting.

You know why? It's because the third slave sounds so familiar. Why did he bury his talent in the ground? He tells us why, right there in the middle of the passage. He was afraid. He suspected the worst. He acted out of fear. Yep. I get that.

This third slave is afraid. Because he only has one talent, he's probably afraid it isn't enough. He looks at the abundance of his fellow slaves and

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<sup>1</sup> "The talent represents an unusually large sum of money." So says Dennis C. Duling in the notes of *The Harper Collins Study Bible*. (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc, 1993), pp.1904-1905.

concludes that he is poor. He compares himself to the Joneses, or the Kardashians, and he doesn't even come close. If I don't think I have enough, I'm probably not too keen on risking anything with it. If I'm afraid of losing what little I do have, it may seem like a pretty good idea to bury it in a hole in the ground.

But that's not the only thing the third slave is afraid of; his fear runs even deeper than the fear of not having enough. At the heart of the matter, *the third slave is really afraid of his master*. What does the slave say? He says, "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed." How does the third slave see the Master? Harsh. Punishing. Arbitrary, showing up to reap and to sow whenever and wherever he feels like it. The slave sees the Master as a taker, a bully, a jerk. And so the slave is afraid of the Master.

Who wouldn't be?

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The slave is afraid of the Master. But the slave is wrong. The slave has turned the Master into something he is not – cruel, unfair, arbitrary, grudge-ful.

The slave is afraid of the Master – who, of course, is a stand-in for God – but the slave does not know this Master. He does not know our God. The slave does not know, or maybe he's forgotten that, before asking him to do anything, *God acts first*. God gives him the seed, gives him the talent, gives him the gift at the very beginning. The slave is wrong. God does not show up arbitrarily without having first acted towards us in love. The slave is wrong. God is not a taker. God is a giver: a generous giver, an abundant giver, an extravagant giver. The slave is wrong. God is the one who loves us first, who loves us when we cannot love ourselves, who loves us until we can love this broken world. The slave is wrong.

And when I think like him – which I do, more often than I'd like to admit – when I think like him, I'm wrong too.

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In the economy of God, the only real risk is not taking a risk at all.

Let's go back to that question from the beginning of my sermon, the question folks were asking back in Jesus' day, the question folks still ask today: *who is God?*

Here, in this story, we have the answer: God is the One who loves us, who loves us enough to *trust* us. God is the One who invests everything in us, the One who takes an enormous risk on us. And God is also the one who hopes against hope that we will not be afraid, but instead will find the courage to risk what we have been given, to make the most of this life we have together.

St. Irenaeus said, "The glory of God is a human being who is fully alive." But that kind of life – a fully alive life – requires courage; that kind of life requires risk: the risk of investing in new relationships; the risk of learning to let go of some of our precious stuff; the risk of getting out of our comfort zones and welcoming the stranger, those who look, or think, or act differently from us. Life, real life, requires risk. And the truth is, most of us, on most days, are willing to settle for something less. We are not alive, not really; we are busy...or

distracted...or numb. And so we squander the glory of God. We take this life that we have been given and stick it in a hole in the ground.

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So, St. Paul's, I have to wonder: what would it like for *us* to take some risks? Because, let's be honest, God is good. God has been good to us. There is life in this church, and energy and growth. But God did not give us these gifts to put them the ground, to bury them behind the walls of this church, to keep all of this goodness to ourselves.

God is the one who wants us to risk what we have for the sake of something better. And I wonder what that might look like. I wonder what our future could hold.

In the economy of God, the only real risk is not taking a risk at all. And the God of love, and the God of promise, is waiting to see what we will do next.

Thanks be to God.