

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word
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First Presbyterian Church
Clarksburg, WV

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Matthew 25:14-30

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. (Matthew 25:29 N.R.S.V.)

Catch-22

Some of the parables of Jesus are quite simple and easy to understand. And then there are those like the one in our text for today. The master, whom we presume to be like God, is described by the third slave as being a harsh man, reaping where he did not sow, and gathering where he did not scatter seed. Does that sound like God to you?

Then there is the statement of Jesus in verse 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.*” That hardly sounds fair or right or just.

It seems like a catch-22 sort of thing. For those of you who may not be familiar with the term, it comes from Joseph Heller’s book by the same name. The book is about a fictional U.S. B-25 bomber squadron in Europe during WWII. The survival rate of the crews who flew the bombers was so low that no one wanted to fly. It was said that a pilot had to be crazy to fly one of these missions.

Now the U.S. military did not want crazy people flying their planes so there was a bureaucratic rule that pilots could be excused from flight duty if they were crazy. However, there was a catch. The flights were terrifying and any normal rational person would be afraid to fly them. So if a pilot went to the doctor and claimed to be crazy that was proof that they were not crazy. And therefore they could not be excused from flying.

There are other Catch-22's in life. If you go to the bank to borrow money because you have no money, they won’t lend you any money. If you have money, the bank will gladly loan you money. But if you have money you don’t need it. It’s a Catch-22.

If you are looking for a job, most places want their applicants to have experience. But the only way to get experience is to have a job. If you have a job, you have experience, but you don’t need a job. It is a Catch-22.

Jesus’ parable of talents has that Catch-22 feel to it. If you have lots, then you don’t need more, but more will be given to you. If you have little or nothing, you need more, but even what you

have will be taken away from you. What are we to make of this?

I invite you to take a closer look at this parable. Let me start by pointing out that the sums of money given to the three slaves were enormous. It would take an ordinary worker 20 years of working six days a week from sun up to sun down to earn a single talent. In today's wages that would be over half million dollars. That is a large sum indeed for anyone. Well, except maybe, for members of congress.

To look at this another way, Judas betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. A talent was worth 6,000 pieces of silver. And to think one of the slaves was given five whole talents. Thirty Thousand pieces of silver, that is serious money.

All of this to point out that there were serious risks involved with this kind of money. There were great opportunities, but also great chances of failure. This was a major responsibility that was given to these three slaves.

The key to understanding this parable is that it is not about succeeding. It is about trying. It is not about achieving success, it is about investing what we have been given. It is about risking and about developing the blessings that God has given us.

Suppose you were approached by the owner of an equipment rental company. The company has all of these big yellow machines, bulldozers, back hoes, excavators, man-lifts, as well as, hammer drills, concrete saws, power washers. There are lots and lots of man toys. You get the picture.

Now suppose the owner is going on vacation for a month and he puts you in charge. When he gets back, how do you think he will respond if you tell him: "I kept everything exactly as you left it boss. As soon as you left, I locked the gates, closed the store and sent all the employees home. I didn't want to rent anything out, because the machines might have gotten broken, or lost, or stolen. So here it is back, boss, just like you gave it to me." Do you think the boss would be pleased?

God wants us to use the gifts that he has given us. The problem is that many of us are afraid of risking. We don't like change and we don't like risking. We prefer to play it safe, like the third slave did.

The paradox is that the more we refuse to risk the smaller we become and the more afraid we become. Eventually, we start to see ourselves as the victim. Bad things are happening to us, but we blame everything on others.

The third slave blames his lack of trying on the boss. "I knew you were a harsh man reaping where you did not sow, gathering where you did not scatter- This is all your fault boss." That is not a good description of God at all. The third slave was simply looking for someone else to blame.

Individual Christians get caught in Catch-22 thinking and so do churches. We can become so afraid of potential losses that we lose sight of our purpose. It is not something we set out to do, it is more a trap that we fall into.

One of my previous churches had a classroom that had fallen into disrepair. There were cracks in the plaster, peeling paint, the carpet was ratty, and the furniture shot. Nobody wanted to use the room. It was awful.

So the church decided to fix the room up. Volunteers gathered and they repaired the walls. They repainted. They put in new carpet. They bought new furniture. They bought new lamps and little stands for them. They decorated the walls. The room looked wonderful!

Then some of the volunteers that had worked so hard on that room came to the session and asked that the room be kept locked. They didn't want people using the room and damaging it. While that was understandable, the session pointed out the whole purpose of fixing up the room was so that people could use it. The church building and its various rooms are not meant to be a museum, they are meant to be used in the ministry.

How easily, and with all the best intentions, we can lose sight of our purpose.

So where is the good news in this passage? How do we escape getting caught in a Catch-22 situation?

First of all, God the creator of all that is and was and ever will be, has bestowed an abundance of gifts and talents upon us. We are not talking about a couple of pennies, we are talking great abundance. This might not be millions of dollars, but we have been greatly blessed. We have been blessed to be a blessing to others.

Second God sent his Son, Jesus the Christ so that our failures can be forgiven. In Christ we find forgiveness not just for sins, but also for failures. We dare to risk, to step out in faith, because in through Christ, God can and will bless even our failures. Our Lord doesn't demand that we succeed, he demands that we try.

I often wish that there were a fourth slave in this parable, one who invested and lost money. I believe our Lord would have commended that slave and given him more to try again. Our God is a God of generosity, abundance, and forgiveness.

Third we have the work of the Holy Spirit. We are not in this alone. One of the signs of a vital church is the willingness to risk. Dying churches look at their limited resources and say, "We can't do this." Vital churches look at the power of the Holy Spirit and say, "With God all things are possible."

I once heard someone pose this question, "If you had all the money and resources in the world, what would you do?" What is the one thing that you would do if you had all the money and resources in the world? Think about that.

Then the speaker posed a second question. “Why aren’t you doing that?”

The Holy Spirit not only calls us to act, the Spirit also provides all of the power and resources necessary to do the things God calls us to do. Thanks be to God!

Amen.