

H. Stephen Shoemaker
November 19, 2017

To Risk Something Big for Something Good
Matthew 25: 14-29

Anthony Campolo reports a sociological survey given to 50 adults over the age of 95. They were asked the question: If you had it to do all over again, what would you do differently? Good question. What would you answer? The people surveyed had a number of answers, but three predominated over the rest. If you had it to do all over again what would you do differently? First, they answered, we would *reflect* more: think more deeply, pay more attention. Reflect more. Secondly, we would *risk* more. Third, we would do more things that would live on after we are dead.

Today's parable of the kingdom is especially about that middle answer: next time around we would take more risks.

There's a phrase in a benediction I sometimes use:

God, give us the grace, the benediction goes, "to risk something big for something good." There's a feeling of grand adventure about it. The kingdom of God ought to blow through us some sense of grand adventure—laden with risk but shot through with an *optimism* about what God is up to in our world.

To risk something big for something good: that's what this parable of the talents is about. Let's listen to it again and see what it makes happen inside us today.

I

The kingdom is like a man going on a journey, Jesus said, and he “called his servants and entrusted to them his property.”

From the beginning we get a clue about what this story is up to. It’s about *responsibility*, being responsible. “To whom much is given much is required” and all that. Ugh, you might say, I have enough responsibility in life—I don’t need another story of one more sermon to remind me of that, or to hand me more!

The master in the story gives the money to his servants and then returns to see how they’ve done. Are you getting depressed yet?

To one he gave five talents, the other two, to the third one talent.

We’re talking about money here. Big money. By some scholar’s estimates a talent was the largest measure of silver existing in that economy, worth about 6,000 denarii. A denarii was a common wage for one day’s work. So let’s calculate and round off: \$100,000.

To the first servant he gave 5 talents or \$500,000. To the second 2 talents or \$200,000. To the third he gave one talent or \$100,000. Then he went away on a long trip.

II

The first servant stood there holding half a million. He takes the money and invests in a new business. Fig preserves. He works hard, has good fortune, the business does well and he doubles his money. He's a millionaire.

The second servant, the one who is given \$200,000, takes the money and invests in the stock market. It's a bull market, he has a good broker, and after a while doubles his money, \$400,000.

Now the third servant. \$100,000 is a lot of money for somebody whose idea of a businessman's lunch is a baloney sandwich, a Hostess Twinkie and a thermos of coffee. He is afraid to take any chances so he sticks the money in a sock and buries it in the ground. The 100 grand won't grow but at least he won't lose it, and in a zero inflation economy the master's money won't lose value.

Which path would you have taken? A new business, the stock market, a hole in the ground?

We know the end of the story so we've already put a negative meaning on the one-talent man's choice. But that's not how Jesus' original hearers may have heard it.

To them, the third servant might well have been thought of as prudent and trustworthy. Rabbinic advice from that time said that money can only be guarded by

placing it in the earth. In fact, Jewish law said that if you buried money and someone stole it, you were not responsible for the loss. It appears the third servant was trying to be wise and responsible, if on the conservative side.

To the original hearers, then, all three had done what was right. The first two might have done better, but all three might well have expected commendation from the master. It's not as if the third servant were foolish or immoral.

There was a non-biblical version of this parable circulating at the time with an interesting contrast to Jesus' parable. In it, the first two servants do as much as in Jesus' parable: they take the money and grow it. The difference is with the third servant who takes the money and spends it on harlots and flute players. I've never understood the part about the flute players, but my guess is that it does not refer to a Sunday afternoon chamber music concert by the flute section of the local philharmonic.

Now *that* would have been the kind of ending of the parable the first hearers would have expected in this parable of responsibility, and which we might expect in typical Sunday sermons.

But Jesus makes the third servant the epitome of responsibility. He did not squander the money in riotous living. The master did not return and find him in the middle of the flute section. He played it safe with the best rules of playing it safe given him by his culture and his religion.

So what will the master say when he sees the third servant? “Thanks for safeguarding my money. You didn’t make anything but you didn’t lose it; and along with the other two investors, I’ve had good diversification in my portfolio.”

III

No. The master returns, calls his servants and asks them to come and settle their accounts.

The first servant comes in and presents his million and the master says, “Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter now into the joy of the master.”

The second servant comes in and says, “Master you entrusted to me 200,000. Here’s 400,000.” And the master says, “Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter now into the joy of the master.”

Now the third servant. He begins his speech on the defensive. Has he seen what the other two have done?

“Master, I knew you were a harsh master who demands profits so I was afraid, went out and hid the money in the ground. Here’s your money!” No profit, but no loss. He almost seems to be relieved of the responsibility. If that’s my view of the master, or of God, I can sympathize.

The master replies: “You wicked and slothful servant. You say I’m a harsh and demanding boss. Then why didn’t you at least put the money with the bankers so I would have earned some interest? So take the talent from him and give it to the one who has ten talents!”

IV

What in the world has happened in this parable? It starts out as a parable of responsibility: God gives us talents and expects us to invest them well. That’s a 365 day a year Biblical truth to live by. What are you doing with the talents you’ve been given?

On good days, we like this truth. But there may be days it gets a bit scary, and we grow fearful. What if God is a harsh master who measures out every bit we’ve been given and then does an audit on the Day of Judgment?

What the parable does at the end is blow up this picture of God. It demolishes a mercantile God who cares only about profits earned—whatever the gifts given might be.

Jesus is saying effect: If you want to worship such a God go ahead, but this is not the God I worship.

God is not a harsh boss who counts the nickels and dimes of God’s investment in us. God is a holy gambler who wants you to risk something big for something good. God

is an entrepreneur who wants you to get out there and do something you've never done before for God's sake and the world's.

God is a generous giver who gives and gives and gives, and this God does not want you living in fear of losing what you've been given. God wants you to be generous like God is generous and invest in the world you've been given. Then let God take care of the bottom line.

The parable of holy responsibility has turned into a parable of holy risk. In the Kingdom of God, life is not lived playing it safe. It is lived in bold risk-taking for the Kingdom of God. It's not about *saving* yourself, but *spending* yourself. Like the woman who took her jar of perfume costing a year's salary and broke it open and poured it over Jesus anointing him in this extravagant even reckless display of love. Like Dorothy Day who poured out her brilliant mind and heart for the poor of New York City.

A Cistercian Abby in Brittany has named its Madonna "Our Lady of Risk." I like that. This is what the kingdom is about.

Some churches should be called St. George the Wicked and Slothful Servant Episcopal Church, or the One Talent Baptist Church—not referring to the poverty of their talents, but to the poverty of their *passion*, the poverty of their *imagination*, the poverty of their willingness to take risks for Jesus' and the gospel's sake.

Martin Luther King once said that the vitality of religion does not lie at its center but at its edges, the growing edges of faith that are pushing on and taking risks to extend the gospel, share the gospel and embody the gospel. Religion and life need the secure center, the center that holds, but it also needs the risk-taking edges.

A church consultant I worked with said that when a church makes a strategic plan for the future these plans should have a 50% chance of succeeding! If they have 100% chance you aren't stretching enough, risking enough. If they have 50% chance of succeeding, that means you are taking the right kind of risk and asking God's help to reach your goals. God is now in the equation.

Religion is about home in the heart of God, the place where we boldly come before the throne of grace and find help in time of need. But God's heart embraces the whole universe, and this God sends us on a journey, "to boldly go where no one has gone before," (to use a phrase you Trekkies out there might remember) to extend the gospel into parts of the community and the world where the gospel's not been. And it may well begin by letting the gospel go into parts of *ourselves* it has never touched before. Taking risks to let the gospel grow in you.

Do you know what's so good about all this? Not only does it make life more interesting, the parable tells us that if we take risks for Jesus' sake, we can't really fail, not in God's eyes.

Nelson Mandela, released after 27 years in prison, came out of the prison doors and spoke to half a million people gathered to hear him speak. This 71-year-old former African prince, now much older, graying and thin, ended his speech with words something like this: “This cause of justice and equality and the end of apartheid, to this cause I have given my life, and if need be, I will give my death.”

V

If we had it to do all over again, said those folk 95 years of age, we’d risk more.

I’m not sure why the phrase stirs me, “to risk something big for something good”, but it does.

Perhaps we’re tired of risking so *little* for what is good. Perhaps we want to be done with risking so *much* for things not so good, for things that don’t really matter.

Maybe this parable is sent to change our view of God and to free us from our fear of failure. God’s not a hard master who looks only at the bottom line. God wants you to take risks and invest yourself in things that do matter.

The parable asks us: “What is your picture of God? Is it based on fear of God as a harsh taskmaster who demands profit on God’s investment in us? Or is it based on a picture of a God of radical generosity who showers us with talents—whether money or

abilities—and only wants them invested in the love of God and neighbor, not buried in a sock in the ground.

God is a gracious giver of everything we are and everything we have, the God who gives and gives and gives. And when we come and stand before this God at the Last Judgment, God will not ask how much you've *saved*, not how much you've *spent*, not how much you've *made*, but how much you've *loved*.

And we'll freeze for a moment with old ideas of a harsh judging God, and God will turn off the lights and turn on the projector and show us a newsreel of our lives, and we'll see all the little things we've done and given to help others, things we never knew made any difference at all. We'll see the real value of our lives, and how no small or large thing done for God and neighbor is ever lost in the economy of God's redemption. And God will turn on the lights and look at us and smile and say:

Well done, good and faithful servant.

Enter now into the joy of the Lord.