

God Says: “Be Brave!”

Matthew 25:14-30

John Dominic Crossan, world famous Jesus scholar and former Davis Lecturer, has said that every church and every person needs to answer these three questions. The first is “What is the character of your God?” The second, as best as I can remember, is something like, “What is the content of your beliefs?” And the third, “What is the shape of your mission?”

Today’s parable turns our attention to the first: “What is the character of your God?” It makes a difference, how we answer that question, in the living of our lives. A risk-taking God is saying to us in this parable: “Be brave!”

There was a sociological study conducted a number of years ago. Fifty adults at the age of 95 were asked this question: “If you had it to do all over again, what would you do differently?” There were a number of answers, but three predominated:

- 1) I would reflect more, that is, think more deeply, pay more attention.
- 2) I would take more risks.
- 3) I would do more things that would live on after I am gone.

Our parable today focuses on the middle answer: I would risk more. So let’s hear it again and see what the Spirit is saying to us.

I

The kingdom, Jesus says, is like a man going on a journey who called his servants in and entrusted to them his property.

From the beginning we get a clue to what the parable is about: it's about responsibility, being responsible. "To whom much is given, much is required" and all that. Ugh! We might be thinking: "I have all the responsibility I can handle, thank you. I don't need another story or sermon to remind me of that!"

The man in the parable gives his money to his three servants and then returns later to see how they have done. Are you getting depressed yet?

He gave to one servant five talents, to the next 2 talents, and to the third one talent.

Jesus is using the story-telling technique of featuring three characters. We do it in jokes too: three men walk into a bar, a priest a rabbi and a Baptist preacher. The first two characters set you up for what happens with the third character—which often brings surprise, a moral one or a funny one. Jesus used the same technique in his parable of the Good Samaritan.

Now to that word "talents". It can also be a downer, as it is used to describe one's personal aptitudes and gifts. Too many sermons have made us ask: "Am I a

five talent person, or a two talent person, or one talent?” Most of us identify as a one talent person.

But talents in the time of Jesus and in Jesus’ parable were not skills and aptitudes like music or sports or I.Q. They were *money*, big money. A talent literally was something “measured”, and in Jesus’ culture a talent was the largest measure. In that economy, a talent of silver was about 6,000 denarii. A denarii was what a common laborer would be paid for one day’s work. So lets’ get our calculators out. About 100,000 in today’s money.

So the man gave 500,00 to the first servant, 200,000 to the second and 100,000 to the third. Then he went on a long trip.

II

The first servant stood there holding half a million. He takes the money and invests in a new business. Figs. He works hard, has good fortune and doubles his money. A cool million.

The second servant, the one given 200,000. He puts it in the stock market, he has a good broker, and he doubles his money: 400,000.

Now the third servant. 100,000 is a lot of money for a guy whose idea of a businessman’s lunch is a baloney sandwich, a Hostess Twinkie and a coke. He is

“afraid”, the text says, afraid to take chances. So he puts the money in a sack and buries it in the ground. The 100,000 won’t get any bigger but he won’t lose any.

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 third servant’s choice. But that’s not how Jesus’ original hearers may have heard it. They hadn’t heard the punch line.

To them, the third servant might have been seen as prudent and trustworthy. Rabbinic teaching and general Jewish legal teaching advised that the safest way to safe-guard your money was to bury it in the ground. And moreover, if it was stolen, the one who buried it would not be held responsible. It appears then that the third servant was trying to be wise and responsible, if on the conservative side.

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

There was a non-biblical version of the parable circulating at the time, with a very different ending. The first two servants took the money and grew it. “Well done!” But the third servant took the money and squandered it on harlots and

flute players. I've not understood the part about flute players, but my guess is that it did not have to do with the flute section of the local philharmonic and Sunday afternoon chamber music concerts.

Now that would have been the kind of ending Jesus' hearers might have expected; a story about being responsible and upright. Boring as a sermon.

But Jesus makes the third servant the model of responsibility. He played it safe with the best rules of playing it safe at the time.

So what did the master say? "Thank you for safeguarding my money. You didn't increase it, but you didn't lose any! Well done, good and faithful servant!?"

III

No. When the master returned the first two had doubled their money, and the master said to both: "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter now into the joy of the master!"

But here comes the third servant. He begins his speech on the defensive:

Master, I knew that you were a harsh master, making profit on other people's labor, so I went and hid the money in the ground. Here, take your money back!

You can almost sense a moment of relief on the third servant's part, now relieved of all that responsibility.

Through the years I've watched the sons of very wealthy and successful men, C.E.O. types, struggle with fear and anxiety. What if they lose what has been handed them? How can I equal what my father has done? It's not easy.

The master now delivers his harsh judgment: You wicked and slothful servant! You know who I am, and what I expect. Why didn't you take the money to the Blue Harbor Bank and buy some C.D.s? You could at least have earned a little interest then!

So the master says, "Take the one talent from him and give it to the one who has ten talents!" What?! Then he added words that sound more like life in our current American economic system than the Kingdom of God: "For to all who have, more will be given, and they will live in abundance, and to those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away."

What is going on here? And that's not even considering the next judgment: thrown out "into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Unpacking *that* would take another sermon. I heard of a preacher preaching on the gnashing of teeth. A man mid-sermon yelled a question: "What if you don't have any teeth?" The preacher replied, "Sir, teeth will be provided."

That's the trouble with literalism. Sue offers us a better understanding of the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. It is, she says, *the kingdom of regret*. We've all lived there!

IV

So back to the question from the beginning of this sermon: "What is the character of your God?" If you believe that God is a harsh taskmaster who punishes those who don't produce—being "productive" is the highest good in our society—then you are apt to be afraid like the third servant and unable to take risks for what is good in your life.

But this is not the *Abba* of Jesus who took the ultimate risk by sending his son to spend his life for our sake and the world's. The *Abba* of Jesus is a spendthrift, risk-taking God who wants us to wade into the water and learn to swim, to spend ourselves for the kingdom of God.

In the benediction I have often offered there is the blessing of the grace "never to sell yourself short, the grace to risk something big for something good." This is the grace God gives us today.

There's a Cistercian Abbey in France that has named its Madonna "Our Lady of Risk." I like that. She did, you know, take risks.

Some churches could be named, “St. John the Wicked and Slothful Servant Episcopal Church.” Or “One Talent Baptist Church”, not referring to the poverty of their talent, but to the poverty of their imagination, the poverty of their passion, the poverty of their willingness to take risks for Jesus’ sake and the sake of the world.

V

As for us here today, who may be wondering about their “talent”, the one real and most important talent you have is *you*. You are the talent of God. And God is by your side rooting for you as you seek to become what God has made you to be.

The question of this sermon is then the question voiced at the end of a poem by Mary Oliver:

Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

And so, in the words of Sara Bareilles in her hit song:

Say what you wanna say
And let the words fall out.
Honestly, I wanna see you be brave.