

Freedom

You've heard today's gospel a million times, and a million times you've been told that *God gives everyone talents, so use yours to your best ability.*

But that interpretation is a million miles from where Jesus is with this.

Partly, it's a language problem; because when we think of a talent we think of tap dancing or being able to stick out your tongue and touch your nose...

But a talent, as used in today's story, has nothing to do with cracking up a three year old.

"Talanton," *Greek for Talent, means money.*

Today, one talent is worth over a quarter million dollars; five talents, a million and a half.

But today's story is probably not about your money or my ability to play the harmonica.

We know it's not about being good with a buck because there's not a word about how the first two guys managed to double their take.

Was it invested conservatively in our diocesan portfolio --- or did they run the tables in Vegas?

We don't know.

Because it doesn't matter — what matters is how freely the two put to use what the Master has so freely given.

This is a story about God's free gift of grace that's given to each of us, and the question becomes, do we have enough faith to put it to use, today?

To paraphrase a favorite slogan of mine:

"Grace is like manure, it's not worth a thing unless it's spread around!"

So today's story is a lot like last week's story of the bridesmaids, 5 wise, 5 morons: it's not that the wise are more deserving than the morons, it's that the wise have faith in the goodness of the groom, and stick around for the groom's arrival, while the 5 morons foolishly dig out looking for an all night oil store — because they don't have faith in the kindness, the love, the welcome, of the groom.

Next week we'll be hip deep in the final judgment, that gathering of the sheep and the goats, and that shocking, single question on which all of judgment stands: which, by the way, has nothing to do with whether we followed the rules — but whether we took care of one another — especially the least among us.

Today, the generous boss gives to his slaves something of enormous value, and leaves them for a long time to figure out what to do with the treasure put so freely in their laps.

Think of that long time as the time between Jesus' ascension and his coming again.

Think of the slaves as you and I.

And now what about the treasure?

Isn't the treasure this new way of living that Jesus invites us into, not as his admirers, but as his followers?

A way of living that puts a hold on hate and revenge and "America First" kind of thinking?

A way of living that looks out for the lost, the least and the woe begotten; that refuses the seduction of Madison Avenue and our celebrity culture and our de facto worship of arms and guns and power?

Isn't that the treasure Jesus gives us?

"You are the salt of the earth!"

"You are the light of the world!"

"So go, sell your possessions and give to the poor,then come, follow me."

To be a follower of Jesus is to take risks.

It's risky forgiving my enemies.

It's risky opening your lives and our property to strangers, to the hungry, to those in prison, to houseless people, to the naked.

In short, this is a story of what a Christian life looks like: it heads out into the world spending the grace of God on this addict, on that orphan, on this mortal enemy.

And it sums up God's repeated message to humanity:

"Don't be afraid....."

.....says the Lord to Moses from the burning bush.....

.....says Gabriel to Mary as she trembles in the scandal of her unwed pregnancy....

.....says Jesus to his terrified disciples in the upper room.....

.....says God to us today in the midst of so much indifference....

"Don't be afraid."

Risk your life on the good news, and don't worry about the results.

Results are God's problem.

Our problem is to live this new Way — not only in our private lives, but especially in our public lives.

And it all comes with this promise:

When we live out the gospel in our day-to-day real life of living, and giving and serving; especially when we do it with abandon, the pool of grace that we get to swim in grows beyond our wildest imagination.

And what about the third guy, Mr. Hide-Mine's-In-A-Jar?

He's the man motivated by fear; for him faith is merely following rules, not getting caught, all in an effort to save his own neck solely by his own efforts.

When we see faith that way, we see God that way too.

He misses the master's overwhelming generosity, contorting the master into a despot, even a demon....and then gets what he expects.

How ironic...

His god is as small as he is, one focused on good and bad deeds, a stickler for the rules, and Mr. Fearful creates his own destiny.

"Your own words condemn you," the Master says to the slave in Luke's version of the story.

He learns that it's not about protecting what we have, fearing its loss, but embracing with abandon the purpose of the gift — and to spend it lavishly.

By making fear the center of his universe, the third man creates his own fearful destiny.

By walking away from simply trusting love, he finds himself in the very hell he was scared of in the first place!

So what does this parable tell us about ourselves, about God?

Perhaps that the only thing God asks of us is to trust his love.

Which is why Jesus says that God is like the dad who races to embrace the son who blew through his undeserved inheritance, not because the son is sorry — but because he loves his boy!

God is like that woman who throws together enough flour and yeast to feed five neighborhoods, just for the fun of it.

Jesus says God is like the farmer who willy-nilly throws good seed in every direction, caring less about where it lands or how well it grows; who says let the weeds and wheat grow together; haul in all of the fish, good and bad alike!

Today's parable dares us to laugh with this God who turns our worlds upside down, and if we can't manage to laugh out loud, maybe we can at least relax a bit, and open our eyes, and maybe, just maybe, crack a smile!

For all we know, the two guys who doubled their money did it at the race-track or by winning the over/under at the UH football game.

When God says, "my ways aren't your ways," God means it in ways that leave most of us scratching our heads, not because God is more serious than us, but because God's joy in every single person knows no limits, and that's tough for us to swallow.

And yet, the reason we can feel free to risk everything, to relax when life's absurdities surround us, is because our future with God is guaranteed.

It's guaranteed even for Mr. Hold-On-To-My-One-Talent, because God hunts down especially the lost, the confounded, the confused.

And who qualifies more for that title than him?

We don't earn it; we certainly don't deserve it: all we can do is accept it, and let gratitude propel our new life.

"For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing." 1 Thes 5:11

+amen