

Taking Chances

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 I gotta wonder if that's what Jesus has in mind today.

First off, a talent, as used in today's story, has nothing to do with our gifts or abilities, that's just a fluke of languages.

"Talanton," the Greek for Talent, means a boatload of money.

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

But today's story is probably not about your piano playing ability or how I use my money.

For one thing, there's not a word about how the first two guys managed to double their take.

Was it invested conservatively with Preston's Cadinha and Co. --- or did they get lucky like Uncle Roy in Vegas?

We don't know.

Because it's not so much the results that matter — as it is freely putting to use what the Master has so freely given.

Because, at it's core, this seems to be 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 share it, now, today?

To paraphrase the slogan pasted to my office door: "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 ten bridesmaids: it's not that the gals with oil were more deserving than those without, it's that they stuck around for the groom's arrival, while the 5 without foolishly went off looking for an all night oil store — because they didn't trust 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.

Think of the treasure as that new way of living that embraces all people, that forgives even our enemies, that feeds the deserving (and undeserving) hungry, that tends to the sick, that welcomes the outcast, even when they smell.

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 your enemies.

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

In short, this is a story of what a Christian life looks like.

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 expectations.

How different from this wild ride is the safe and secure life of the third slave; Mr. Hide-Mine's-In-A-Jar.

Despite the master's overwhelming generosity, the third slave sees only a despot, a tyrant, even a demon, and he acts accordingly.

His is a small "g" god, a vengeful god, a god who counts up good and bad deeds, a stickler for the rules and regs, and Mr. Fearful gets what he expects.

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

He learns in jaw dropping fashion that safety hasn't crossed the master's mind; prudence is not where it's at.

The gift is given for one reason, and one reason only: to spread it around!

By putting fear of the master at the center of his universe, Mr. Cover-My-Butt gets the very response that he expects.

Imagine if we get the God we imagine....

If we do, what kind of god do you get?

Jesus says God is like the old dad who cares less about looking the fool as he races to embrace the son who blew through his undeserved inheritance, rushing to welcome this son who even then is scheming how to butter up the old man.

Jesus says God is like a woman who throws together enough flour and yeast to feed five neighborhoods, just for the heck of it.

Jesus says God is like the insane farmer who willy-nilly throws good seed in every direction, seeming to care less about where it lands or how well it grows.

Jesus points out a rich man, (which all common sense insists is a man blessed with abundance and therefore blessed by God,) only to declare that a nine foot camel will thread a needle's eye before the rich will enter God's kingdom; only to tell us later that both camel and rich man can make it through, but the process can be painful.

Today's parable dares us to laugh with this God who turns our worlds upside down, and if we can't manage a belly roll, maybe we can at least unclench our fists, 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 last week's Jets/Steelers 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 frowns deeper than we do, but because God laughs at so much more than we can ever imagine.

And one more thing.

The reason we can feel so free to risk everything, to laugh when life's absurdities surround us, is because our future with God is set.

It's even set for that dummy, Mr. Safety, because God hunts down especially the lost, the confounded, the confused.

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

So my beloved friends, "give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over, will be given to you.

For with the same measure you measure — it will be measured back to you."

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