



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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Sunday, November 17, 2002
The Twenty-sixth Sunday after Pentecost

Choral Eucharist
at 12:10pm

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Canon Harry E. Krauss
on
Matthew 25:14-15, 19-29

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THE ONE-TALENT PERSON

The servant said, "I was afraid I might disappoint you, so I found a good hiding place and secured your money. Here it is safe and sound down to the last cent." The master was furious, "That's a terrible way to live! It's criminal to live cautiously like that!"

I always find the parables of our Lord absolutely intriguing. Like any good story they are well worth hearing yet again. And the Parable of the Talents is no exception in my book.

A busy man who is about to leave town for a while calls his servants and puts them in charge of his property until he returns. He gives one servant five talents, (which we should understand is an enormous amount of money, about 100 years worth of salary for a laborer). Another he gives three talents, (sixty years of salary) and the last servant, one talent, (twenty years worth of salary). He returns in due time to find that the first two servants took the money and doubled it. The third had merely hidden it and was able only to give back to the man what he had originally offered. And the story ends harshly. The master orders that the third servant's money be taken from him and that he be thrown "into outer darkness." Of course the master in the story is meant to be God and we are represented by the three servants with the various talents. So the parable is about you and me and some very important aspects of how we are expected to live as Christians.

This morning, however, I only want to look at the one-talent man, the "play-it-safe" guy. He's center stage in this drama and I believe that he's got much to teach us.

First, he's like a lot of people. There are far more one-talent folks walking down the street than five-talent types. He's like the typical Jane or Joe. After all, how many Bill Gates or Nobel prize-winners or Derek Jettters are there running around? Yet one-talent people have several dangers which usually hover around them, it has been observed. Frequently such a person is tempted to think, "What can I do in life; I don't have much of anything to work with. I'm not too bright. I don't have much money. I'm not clever. I'm not good looking." Too often these feelings breed resentment. Likewise, such an attitude can encourage grudges against more able friends, relatives and neighbors. Even life itself might be begrudged. In this regard did we all notice what the one-talented servant exclaimed to his master? "I knew you to be a hard man." Paraphrased, he was saying to his him, "Master, I know you have high standards and hate careless ways, that you demand the best and make no allowances for

error.” He’s blaming his master; he’s even accusing him of reaping where he didn’t sow. So he treads the very thin ice of destructive criticism which too often is the recourse of those who feel and resent mediocrity.

But more than one commentator has told us that the real difficulty with the one-talent man is that the reason for his failure is fear. Verse 25 tells it all, “I was afraid....” The difficulty with the parable is that it is about far more than investing twenty years worth of salary and winning the Wall Street game. Actually the story is a cautionary tale. It tells us the unappealing and sad results of catering to fear, the fear of taking a risk. The kind of fear that surrounds that one-talent man allows him to be content with the status quo in any area of life; allows him to be silent when really important things are very much getting off the track and evil is rearing its ugly head; allows him to coolly overlook the crying and urgent needs of others; allows him to be indifferent to the dynamism that faith demands and to remove himself from the exciting challenges that God sends his way. What the one-talent man misses is that to be part of the family of faith or the kingdom of God absolutely requires we be risk-takers. There, I’ve said it. It’s out of the bag. God’s frozen-chosen, the Episcopalians, are meant to be risk-takers!

Few of us by nature are, however. In fact most of us are skilled in avoiding the subject. For example, the few times I’ve ever talked about this parable some one has inevitably tried to distract my attention from risk-taking by bringing up the seeming inequalities of the story.

The question is of course, why did one servant get five talents, another get two and the last get only one. Some claim that’s really not fair. Wrong question and wrong conclusion. It is up to God how he will offer talents. But crucial equalities are there, if we only look. There is the equality of opportunity and in responsibility proportionate to the gift, be it five, two or one talent’s worth. The one-talent man threw this equality away. There is likewise the equality of God’s love which abounds in this parable. The first two servants, Jesus tells us, “entered into the joy” of their Lord. Each of the servants had been provided for, each had a gift and each was given the opportunity to enter into the kingdom of God. The one-talent man wasted this too.

Having that issue out of the way, we cannot escape the matter of risk-taking in the life of the Christian. It is central to the Gospel and therefore this parable. We could be generous and quote Michelangelo who once said, “The great danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high, and we miss it, but that it is too low and we reach it.” But Charlotte Bronte was more to the point when she said, “Better to try all things and find all empty, than to try nothing and leave your life a blank.”

We will have wasted our morning if we don’t see the point that Jesus puts before us. Namely, we are told not that we should or might take risks, but that we must take risks for Him. Sound radical? It is, but in the original meaning of the word, fundamental. More than one preacher has observed that prudence and the desire for security are a necessary part of life; but they are not the prevailing values in the Kingdom of God. God’s reign, we are told elsewhere by Jesus, is like finding treasure in a field, not like burying it! Remember, the person who dug up the treasure risked everything to have and buy that field. The person who dug up the treasure urgently wanted to be part of God’s kingdom and be in relationship with Him. It is this same thing which underlies and makes sense out of our parable. This kind of risk-taking is what we call faith, isn’t it? Lest I be tagged as a revolutionary, I want to assure the more hesitant among us that I am not suggesting that God’s people throw all caution to the wind. The way in which God gives to us ensures that the liberal amounts of money offered to each of the servants were offered each according to the ability of each servant. The Lord knows us and he never entrusts us with more than we can handle or less than we can handle. The Lord is not encouraging foolish extravagance or taking risks to test Him. He’s not suggesting that we plow forward without thinking.

But there is overwhelming evidence through out all of Scripture that faith means daring to risk. In our parable two of the servants dared to use the talents. And the result of their daring was identical rewards: praise, stewardship of additional blessings and an invitation to enter their master's joy. Jesus wants you and me, that is, as individuals and as the Saint Thomas family to live out of a sense of giftedness or blessing. He wants our awareness of God's grace to grow. He wants us to see that faithful risk-taking will allow our accomplishments to be more than extraordinary. In the end this parable is the story of rich grace, living life in the embrace of whatever abundance with which we've been blessed and risking that abundance for God's glory.

So, which way will it be for us? Will we stand in the way of miraculous new life by taking no risks? Will we be satisfied to hear the Lord say to us what he said to the one-talent man, "That's a terrible way to live. It's criminal to live cautiously like that!" Or will we do as we sang in the last stanza of our first hymn,

To give and give, and give again,
What God hath given thee;
To spend thyself nor count the cost:
To serve right gloriously
The God who gave all worlds that are,
And all that are to be.