

Making the Most of Our Lives

Matthew 25:14-30 *'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things. I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.'*

As we hear this parable of the coming of God's reign, we need to remember what parables are. They are not puzzles that have one "right" answer, which we have to figure out. They are not to be taken literally, but imaginatively, inspiring reflection and insight. The parable of the talents is one of Jesus' most powerful teachings about how important and precious are these lives of ours, and how urgent and exciting it is when we claim our uniqueness and live as channels of God's love.

A landowner is going on a trip. He entrusts all his property to his servants. This can lead to reflect on God and God's lordship over all of life. "The earth is the Lord's," says psalm 24, "and all that is in it; the world, and all who live in it." The world doesn't belong to us, but to God who called it into being and sustains and guides its life. God entrusts to us humans the care and nurture of the creation. This is the meaning of the word "dominion" in the creation story of Genesis 1. Not domination. Not exploitation. And certainly not destruction. But stewardship, caring for that which does not belong to us but is entrusted to us.

We may not like terms like "slave" or the image of God as "lord" which are used a good deal in scripture. However distasteful these words may be to us, the realities behind them are at the core of our faith and life. We must recognize that it is not we who give and sustain life, but God. In this sense, God is "lord." We are to live responsibly within the web of life God has created. Given our misbehavior toward each other and the environment, it is surely the right moment in history to regain the wisdom of scripture, that our proper relationship to life is that of servants, those who are to live in the service of life. So, already the parable expresses an important spiritual reality—life is the gift of God and we are servants entrusted with life for its stewardship.

The landowner gives different sums of money to the servants. Five talents, two talents, one talent. A talent was a measure of money in those days, roughly equivalent to about \$1,000. One talent was more than fifteen years wages, an incredibly enormous sum. Even though the distribution isn't equal, it is neither unfair nor unjust. The master simply knows the abilities of the servants and gives them what he considers

appropriate responsibility. But all three are treated as trustworthy and given responsibility.

We are trusted by God and entrusted with our very lives. Jesus was surprisingly positive about how God views us. There is nothing of what later was developed as a doctrine of "original sin." Jesus does not go around telling people: "You miserable wretches! You are hopelessly sinful and incapable of doing anything that is good in God's sight." The parable expresses the opposite. God trusts us and entrusts us with abundance.

Though enormous, the amounts are not equal. Someone asked me a good question the other day, "Why do you think some people are able to be more at peace than others; they find it easier?" We've all wondered about such things. There seems to be a certain inequality in our lives. Some just seem to have an easier time with some things than others. Some seem to have many gifts, while some have a hard time getting a handle on even one gift. It's just the way things are. But the point of the parable is that we NOT compare our lives to others'. When we do that, we get frozen. We can't affirm and use our own gifts and abilities, discern and follow our own callings in life, because we are always looking outside ourselves for a measure. And for many of us, that measure always leaves us on the short end. Then we fall into self-pity or complaining, instead of knowing the abundance of our own life, the value of our own gift, whatever it is, and exercising it to the full. If we could each keep focused on letting go of that comparison thing, then we would really begin to live! We would begin to see that our lives are abundant, that we have everything we need to live the unique lives God has given us. We would find a new way of looking at our lives, not in terms of what we don't have, but what we have, not who we aren't but who we are.

A talent was a sum of money. Because of this parable and the development of language, "talent" came to mean an ability. We talk in the church about gifts. God has given to the community of faith and to each person gifts to be identified, affirmed, and exercised for the benefit of all. There are an infinite variety of gifts, wrote Paul in 1 Corinthians. All are from God's spirit and each one, no matter how we might measure them from our perspective, is essential to the whole.

The parable indicates that every one of us has everything we need for a creative and abundant life that not only brings us joy but also benefits life around us. The one talent is as valuable as the five talents. The point is what we do with it, what we do with these lives we have. And that's how the parable plays out. The first two servants immediately put their talents to work. They risk. They invest. The result is an increase. The parable is not talking about money and is not to be taken as an endorsement of the free enterprise system of capitalism! It is the

free enterprise system of God's incredible mercy and abundance implanted in us, the life with which we are entrusted to make into something beautiful and bountiful for ourselves and others.

The third servant immediately buries his sum in the ground, fearing the master's displeasure if he squandered it. He doesn't trust the master. He doesn't trust himself. He doesn't trust life. So, he doesn't do anything. A rabbinic law said that one who buried property entrusted to him was no longer liable. It was the safest path. It avoided risk and responsibility. If we don't risk and if we avoid taking responsibility for our lives, then we play it safe. But we never LIVE! We merely exist.

When we stop comparing ourselves with others, when we stop looking outside ourselves for something or someone to tell us who we are and what our lives are to be, then we are on the right path. That's the journey of faith, the inward journey of self-knowledge that gives rise to the outward journey of what we do with our lives in relation to the world around us. Parker Palmer emphasizes the importance of this in his book LET YOUR LIFE SPEAK. Palmer looked at this old Quaker saying in a new way. Let our lives tell us who we are and what we are to do. Learn to be silent and listen inwardly to our own lives. If we do that, then we will know who we are and what we are to do and give to life. That's why the inward journey is so important—silence, meditation, self-examination, and prayer, the tools and practices that awaken us to our unique selves. It is the journey of knowing and affirming our own lives and the gifts God has given us. It is the journey of freeing ourselves from the tyranny of measuring ourselves against others and looking to something or someone outside ourselves for direction. It is the journey of unburying our gifts, of taking the risks and responsibilities that are part of a truly fruitful and happy life.

When we are on the journey of listening to our own life, the results can be truly surprising! If we start by being faithful to that one gift we have, whatever it is, it begins to bear fruit precisely because it is authentically who we are and what we have to give. And if we stay with it, following this gift wherever it leads us, we will find life increasing in us and around us. That is often the problem. We don't stay with things long enough. We start using the gift we've come to believe is ours, but then give up too soon, before a harvest has the chance to sprout up. We say to ourselves, See, I knew my gift wasn't that important or needed. I knew it was just too small and insignificant. So we bury our gift again, and in the process lose ourselves and relinquish our lives.

The parable is about risk. Life doesn't come alive until we risk, until we invest, until we use our gift and live our own lives, not someone else's. Playing it safe may keep us out of trouble or shield us from getting hurt or experiencing rejection, at least for a while. But playing it safe is not the way real life happens. If you try to hang onto your life,

taught Jesus, you lose it. If you let go of it, if you risk it, you find true life. Risk being thought of as strange. Risk swimming against the stream. Risk being rejected or losing friends. Risk leaving your loneliness and isolation. Risk sharing yourself, all of yourself, with others. Risk letting go of your addiction to controlling things, and let other people and life itself be. And discover life as it really is, as God made it—a great, mysterious gift that is full of things dying and things rising to new life.

When the master returns, the servants report what they've done. The first two servants are rewarded for the way they've made something with what was entrusted to them. Their willingness to risk gains the master's approval and joy. They are rewarded—with what? Higher wages? A promotion? No. They are rewarded with more responsibility! You have been faithful over a little bit, what seemed to you to be so small and insignificant. You have shown careful stewardship of whatever life has given you. So now, here's more stewardship! Enter into my joy.

A Jewish saying goes: "The reward for fulfilling the Law is (more) fulfilling the Law." (E. Schweizer, THE GOOD NEWS ACCORDING TO MATTHEW) This is a whole different reward system, this kingdom of God business. A little bit of faithfulness results in more faithfulness. A little faithful stewardship of our lives brings us more stewardship of life. A little loving of others gets us more loving of others. A little bit of giving will reward us with more giving. What a crazy system! But it brings us the greatest blessing life has to offer—sharing God's own joy! Joy in life. Joy in discovering, affirming, and living who we really are meant to be and what we are given to do in the service of life.

What about the last part of the parable? The master calls the third slave wicked, lazy and worthless. This must be seen against the message of the parable. The seeking of safety, the fearful approach to living these lives God has given us, results in missing what life is really about. It means the worst kind of risk, the risk of coming to the end of our days and not ever having known what it is to give, what it is to share our lives, what it is to be truly ourselves, who God made us to be. Parker Palmer writes of an old Hasidic story. It tells of Rabbi Zusya who, when he was an old man, said, "In the coming world, they will not ask me: Why were you not Moses? They will ask me: Why were you not Zusya?" (LET YOUR LIFE SPEAK) The harshness of the end of the parable is characteristic of teachings by which Jesus wanted to warn us in the strongest way about what is most essential, what is most important. How we are living these precious, unique, and abundant lives God has given us? In fear and safety? Or in risk, being responsible to and for our lives and gifts, experiencing more and more abundance?