

Saint Paul Church 11/15/20 A.D. Saint Matthew 25: 14-30.

Today I'd like us to remember something that all of us sometimes forget: that what God requires of us is not success, but faithfulness.

The Holy Gospel we just read is known as the Parable of the Talents. That word "talent" has a double meaning. Its original meaning in the Greek of the New Testament refers to a huge sum of money. In the ancient world, a talent was worth what an ordinary laborer earned over the course of fifteen years. Thus, giving each of his servants one or more talents, the master in this story is entrusting them with a fortune.

The second meaning of the word "talent" results from one interpretation of this very story. As the master entrusts his servants with talents, so God entrusts each of us with abilities. Talent has thus come to mean ability or skill. We say that someone has a talent for music or cooking or business. But the Parable of the Talents isn't really about money or ability alone. It's about something even more important. The Parable of the Talents is about trust.

The story opens with an act of trust. The master is about to leave town on a journey. He entrusts his wealth to three servants. Each is given a different sum of money. Yet each is given a big amount — one talent or two or five. It's clear that the master trusts each of his servants. He even hands over the money without any instructions.

After a long time, the master returns and calls in his three servants. Two of them have doubled their money. The third has made nothing at all; he returns to his master exactly what he received. It turns out that this servant had simply buried the money in the ground, a common security measure in ancient times. He reveals the reason for his action: he was afraid of his master.

His trust in his master was zero, so he reduced his financial risk to zero. Yet he reduced the possibility of profit so that it too was zero.

The story as we have it leaves us with an unanswered question. How would the master have responded to the first two servants if they had not brought in a profit? What if they had put the money at risk and come back empty-handed?

I think the master would have accepted them. After all, in the parable what he commends is not their profits, but their faithfulness. He does not commend the servant who produced five talents more than the one who produced two. Each receives the same commendation: “Well done, good and faithful servant.” Each receives the same invitation: “You have been faithful over a few things; I will set you over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.”

And in responding to the third servant, the master makes it clear that he would have accepted anything — even rock-bottom savings account interest — that was motivated by faith rather than fear.

Moreover, it's notable that the servant who is given five talents makes five talents more, and the one who receives two makes two more. This doubling in each case suggests that the growth is automatic. It's not the cleverness of the servants that produces results so much as their willingness to act out of trust, gifted by the Holy Spirit.

The parable is not about money or ability so much as it is about trusting. The master trusts his servants and acts on this trust. The servants — or rather two of them — return the favor by acting out of trust rather than fear, and they come back to their master with one fortune stacked on top of another.

The third servant paints an ugly picture of a grasping master who demands success. What this servant gets for his trouble is exactly the rejection he fears. He's a small-minded man who insists that his master is just as small-minded.

The other two servants, however, recognize generosity when they see it. The piles of money thrust their way reveal a guy who's pretty generous, who takes a risk, who accepts them, even honors them. Finding themselves at the receiving end of such outrageous trust, they feel empowered and are willing to take risks of their own. The love their master has shown them overcomes their fear of failure. They realize that any master who treats his money manager in this open-handed way is more interested in them than in turning a profit.

This brief story about a master and his three servants turns upside down the standards of their world and ours. It announces that the worst thing that can happen to us is not failure. The worst thing that can happen is that we make God out to be a horrible old grouch who rejects us when we fail.

The story tells us that the worst thing is not losing out. The worst thing is never risking. In the eyes of God, the fear that keeps a treasure in the ground is an act of atheism. The freedom that puts that treasure at risk — and may even result in its loss — that is an act of true faith.

We can learn from our failures, and often it is failure that provides the most indelible lessons. But fear teaches us nothing — until we leave it behind.

The good news of the gospel stage is crowded with people who are there to shock us into the recognition that it is stupid and absurd not to trust in God, the creator of all. There's the snide elder brother who refuses to welcome home the prodigal son. The all-day workers who demand that late arrivals receive less than the daily wage. The Pharisee who tries to talk God into accepting him because he's kept the rules, not because God is merciful. All these live in a gray, fearful world, where grace is absent and slackers get thrown to the wolves.

We understand these skeptical/trustless people because we too are given to burying our talent out of fear. We're made anxious by the negative idols of our imagination. We know what it's like to misperceive and mistrust God.

What if the true, ever-living and only God has no interest in keeping score? What if God's concern is simply that we all get up and take a turn at bat?

The Good News of Jesus gives new meaning to success and security. Success is found, not in accumulating more than we can ever use, but in our willingness to risk in response to God's invitation. Security is found, not in keeping pace with our rising paranoia, but in the utterly reliable God who trusts us before we trust ourselves, who risks, and asks that we risk also.

To sum up, let me share with you words from the French scientist and theologian Dr. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. In his best-known book, *The Divine Milieu*, he writes:

“God obviously has no need of the products of your busy activity since he could give himself everything without you. The only thing that concerns him, the only thing that he desires intensely, is your faithful use of your freedom and the preference you accord him over the things around you. Try to grasp this: the things that are given to you on earth are given to you purely as an exercise, a blank sheet on which you make your own mind and heart. You are on a testing ground where God can judge whether you are capable of being translated to heaven and into his presence. You are on trial so that it matters very little what becomes of the fruits of the earth, or what they are worth. The whole question is whether you have learned how to obey and how to love.”

The Parable of the Talents is not really about money or abilities. It's a story about trusting, a story about taking risk from time to time. My dear Sisters and Brothers, life's the same way. What's important is not money or abilities in themselves, but our decision to use them in ways that show our willingness to risk and to trust. The central question about life is not “What did we accomplish?” but whether we learned to obey, whether we learned to love all that is around us in what we have experienced in this one amazing and incredible life. Thanks be to God for the opportunity to be a good steward. Thanks be to God. Amen.