

## Risky Business

Do you like to watch old movies? I do. Back in the eighties, Tom Cruise starred in a movie about a young man, a high school senior whose parents go out of town one weekend. While they're away, he meets and gets involved with a woman who is—let's see, how can I put this delicately?—a member of the world's oldest profession. And the two of them turn his parents' home into a place of business. *Her* business. Now this takes place in the realm of Hollywood make-believe, in which all misadventures culminate in a nice, neat, happy ending. Maybe you remember the movie. It's titled—most appropriately —“Risky Business.”

In today's reading from Matthew's Gospel, we hear about two enterprising fellows who go into business, both trading with vast sums of money. They work for a man who's preparing to go on a journey. But before leaving, he does something surprising. He turns over all of his wealth to his servants. A total of eight talents!

Now a talent is the largest denomination of money mentioned in the Bible. It's worth about six thousand denarii. So for an average worker, just one talent is worth more than fifteen years' wages. The sums of *five* talents and *two* talents—received respectively by the first and second servants—these are astronomical amounts of money.

The two servants who risk their talents, putting them to use, actually *double* what's been entrusted to them. And for this they receive praise and affirmation. Their master makes them executive vice-presidents and invites them to celebrate with him. But the third servant, who takes no chances with the one talent he receives, doesn't fare as well. In fact, he ends up alone. Desolated. Devastated. What's up with that?

My brothers and sisters, it seems to me that one of the keys to understanding the sad fate of this one-talent servant lies in what he believes about his master. Listen to his words: *Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground.*

This guy is terrified of his master. He sees the master as hard-hearted. Judgmental. Dread-inspiring. Wrathful. Punishing.

Have you ever known anyone who feels that way about their Lord? If so, do you think they have it all wrong? Do you think the one-talent servant has it all wrong?

This servant sees *his* lord in a particularly negative way—an opinion, incidentally, that isn't shared by his fellow-servants. Maybe it's because he can't see his master's goodness. Or maybe it's because he *won't*. Whichever it is, he sees his master in a very dim light.

Could this servant have *chosen* darkness as a way of being in the world? Could that be why he *ends up* in darkness? Do you think that the darkness that ultimately envelops him might just be of his own making?

Whatever source we attribute to that darkness, there's a strangeness about this parable that *our* Master tells just before he himself departs. The story perplexes. It seems to us as though this one-talent servant should get a happy ending, because he seems to be such a careful steward. We identify with him, especially in this day and time when many have lost their trust in financial institutions. For some financial institutions, in an effort to boost sales and enhance profit margins, have resorted to fraudulent practices. Leading some depositors to conclude that

maybe it's not such a bad idea to stash their cash under the mattress or conceal their treasure in a hole in the back yard.

But what happens with this one-talent servant suggests just the opposite. Unable to overcome his fear, he plays it safe. He hides his light under a bushel. He buries his talent in the ground. He risks nothing. He gains nothing. And he ends up losing everything.

And then Jesus has the master of this servant sum things up with words that puzzle us because—at least the first time we hear them—they don't sound like Jesus at all. Here's what the master says: *For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.*

Doesn't this statement sound a lot like the way the world operates? Even in our own day and time. The middle class diminishes, as the chasm between the haves and the have-nots widens. The rich are getting richer. And the poor are getting poorer.

But, as Taylor Burton-Edwards points out, this statement isn't just about the ways of the world. "It also describes the kingdom of God...[More] is given to those who have. More is

*given.*” You and I can’t *earn* it. “It’s a *gift*...Receive this lavish gift...and live accordingly, and there will only be more to follow. Walk away from this gift, try to bury it, and you’ve buried your own future.”

Like the one-talent servant. I think that we’re told about him for a reason. And that reason is to guide us toward the realization that it’s not such a great idea to sit on resources or to squirrel them away for a rainy day. What we have has been entrusted to us for a purpose. *God’s* purpose. Through this story, is Jesus cautioning us that if what we’ve been given isn’t being used in ministry and mission, it’s not being used in accordance with God’s purpose?

Like the servants in the parable, we too serve a Master who has given something of incalculable value into our keeping and then physically departed from us. For a long, long time. We who live in this time between the time of his ascension and the time of his return, we too serve a Master who will come again one day to settle accounts with us. And—as Paul reminds Thessalonian believers—while we’re waiting, we had best keep awake and we had best be ready. Ready to roll up our sleeves and get to work. We please the Master by putting all that he has

given to good use. With resourcefulness. With imagination. With creativity. We please the Master by being about his business. And that business involves an element of risk.

It's risky, this business that Jesus calls us to. It's risky because the work Jesus does—the work Jesus asks *us* to do—causes seismic change. Overturns the status quo. And those who are *invested* in the status quo—those who continue to profit as long as the world's unjust systems and oppressive structures remain in place—they aren't going to like that one little bit! Jesus wasn't popular with the powerful. And if we follow where he leads, we aren't going to be popular, either. But Jesus doesn't call you and me to be popular. He calls you and me to be faithful and fruitful.

And in order to do that, we need to understand just what it is that the talents in this parable represent. Now, it's true that after the Bible was first translated into English, this very story introduced the word *talent* into our language, as a synonym for skills and abilities. Some think that's the extent of the meaning of *talent* in the parable. Others believe that in Jesus's story, these talents denote only money. Maybe that's why lots of pastors like to use this text to preach on financial stewardship!

But the truth is that these talents symbolize *everything* that an extravagantly generous God has given. In the parable, the master entrusts his servants with *all* his property. With everything he has.

And that's what our God does. Gives it all! Bestows on us every gift. The gift of abilities. The gift of intellect. The gift of wealth. The gift of time—all the time we need.

And grace. Even grace. Especially grace! God pours out grace. Abundant, overflowing, saving grace! We are recipients of grace.

Everything we are, we have received from God's hand. Everything we have, we have received from God's hand. And we have received everything we *need* to take care of God's business. The business of speaking truth to power. And seeking justice for the forgotten. And releasing the captives. And giving sight to those in darkness. And being peacemakers. And spreading the good news. And sharing God's love with those who need it most. Proclaiming and advancing God's present and future reign on earth!

All this is God's business. And to accomplish it, God has given every gift and grace because—for some reason—God has confidence in us stumbling, bumbling human creatures.

Sounds risky, doesn't it? So recklessly, so immeasurably does God love us—*us!*—that God left God's throne and came to us in Jesus and risked it all on a cross for us. During this time until he returns, he's asked us to be about his business—a risky business, to be sure. But we who seek to grow into the likeness of Christ by risking it all even as *he* risked it all—we have the hope of one day being gathered into his presence and invited to celebrate with him. We who dare to risk all that we have for him, we live in the hope of hearing him say: *Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Master!*”

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.