

## **Risking It All: Matthew 25:14-30**

NCC, November 9, 2014, Year A, Proper 27 (Using Proper 28 Gospel text)

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What do you do with a story like this? On the surface, it seems so simple, yet the more you dig, the more convicting it becomes. The temptation is to preach a sermon on the modern English word “talents”, a personal ability, like singing (playing the organ) or electrical work (knitting) or baking pies.

You’ve surely heard this sermon before. “Use your talents for Jesus! Don’t bury your talents in the ground!” It’s a sermon used to motivate. Use your gifts!

But what happens if you don’t? If you’re too shy to sing in public, or your job is so demanding, and with the kids, you never have time to engage in your talents, for God or for yourself? Will you, like the 3rd slave, be thrown into some special hell created for the lazy, talented people?

Take comfort in knowing that the biblical word translated “talent” is actually a unit of money. Jesus is talking about money, not pie-baking, which, now that I think of it, is not that comforting either. But what an appropriate time to read such a parable, the Sunday after we approve a new budget. This time of year, we could always use some more talents in the plate, so that we end the year with strong giving.

I know what you’re thinking... “please, don’t let this be another sermon on money. We’ll increase our giving, if you promise not to preach about it!”

But, you know, this parable, it’s really not about giving, either. If it’s not about using your talents, and it’s not about giving to God, what is it about?

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On Facebook and on the morning shows this week, a story has made the rounds about the most expensive home currently for sale. It’s in Beverly Hills and listed at \$195 million. It comes complete with a living space of 53 thousand square feet, that includes 12 bedrooms and 23 bathrooms. I know what you’re thinking...why 23 bathrooms? Isn’t 22 enough? But when you have an emergency, and all 22 bathrooms are currently occupied, you’re going to wish you put in that 23rd!

The master bedroom alone is 5,000 square feet, the size of most, reasonably-sized mansions! Outside, you’ll find a 25-acre estate, with a working vineyard, a spare house, a spa, and a 128 foot-long pool.<sup>1</sup>

This is a home built for the master in our text. He’s that kind of rich.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://money.cnn.com/2014/11/06/real\\_estate/most-expensive-listing/index.html](http://money.cnn.com/2014/11/06/real_estate/most-expensive-listing/index.html)

Here's what you need to know about a talent: this is no small amount of money. Biblical financial experts tell us that one talent was worth about 6,000 denarii. That clears it up, doesn't it? ONE denarius was a days wage for slaves like the ones in our text. *One* talent was like 20-years wages, equivalent of almost \$2 million in today's economy.

Our master is not some simple, above-average wealthy man. This man is absurdly wealthy. He is the 1% of the 1%ers, a money-grubbing, absentee land-owner, who has built an empire by taking advantage of other people's hard work, sowing where he did not reap.

It's a rigged game he's playing. He gives all the risk to these slaves, and enjoys all the profit. Who wouldn't be afraid of a man like this, who sees nothing but dollar signs when he looks at people's faces?

Two of the slaves get it. Knowing their life is at stake, they become ruthless like their master, so they can throw a few more million-dollar coins into Ebenezer Scrooge's purse.

The third slave...well, he gets it, too. He knows how his master is, and he is the only one who has the audacity to say it to the master's face...and yet knowing how his master is, he acts the opposite way. Money is to be saved, not risked in the pursuit of more profit. He could have at least put the money in the bank and earn interest, a practice forbidden by Jewish laws of his day.

Instead, he takes no risk, fearing what would happen if he upsets the master, and he buries his talent in the sand to keep it safe. In the end, he receives the very fate he was trying to avoid.

Now, I know what you're thinking. This ruthless, money-grubbing, people-abusing, "little m" master...I thought he was supposed to represent the "big M master" in this parable? Isn't he supposed to be God?

For some, the match is perfect. God is the Master to be feared. We are given a job to do until Jesus returns. If we do not increase God's harvest, there will be hell-to-pay!

But such a comparison ignores the rest of the story Matthew has been telling us. From the beginning of the Gospel, Matthew has told us that Jesus is *Emmanuel*, God with us. And how does God act, when God is with us?

Matthew tells us, "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, curing every disease and every sickness among the people" (Matthew 4:23).

Jesus taught that you do not repay evil with evil...and “if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also” (Matthew 5:38-39).

When it comes to treasure, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth...but store up...treasures in heaven....For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matthew 6:19-21).

To the tax collector Levi, whose trade relied on abusive financial practices, he said, “I desire mercy not sacrifice.”

To the ones who tried to place heavy religious burdens on the shoulders of the people, Jesus said, “The sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath.”

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Immediately after our story today, Jesus tells the prophecy of the Sheep and the Goats, which we considered a few weeks ago. “Whatever you do to the least of these,” Jesus said, the very people that this master has stomped on in pursuit of his profit, “whatever you did to them, you did to me.”

This master doesn’t sound anything like Jesus! So what do we do with this parable?! Maybe I should’ve just stuck with a sermon on baking pies for Jesus, and be done with it!

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But before we throw this parable out into the outer darkness, let’s take one more, fresh look.

The two slaves, they knew the character of their master, as diabolical as it was, and they responded accordingly. The third slave, he knew it too, yet knowing how the master was, he refused to act accordingly.

Do we know the character of our Master, “big M”, and do we respond accordingly? An absurd amount of grace and love has been given to us...but do we still act as if God is a disappointed, ruthless master, ready to toss us out into the outer darkness?

Do we treat church as if it’s business is to preserve the status quo, holding onto the tradition of the faith, or do we follow the example of Christ who spoke boldly and prophetically to the religious and political powers of the day?

Do we treat our buildings and budgets as resources to be buried, or do we follow the example of our Master and risk these gifts in beautiful ministry to our community, as our Master risked it all for us?

The church is being torn a part right now over the debate over sexuality, asking if God would welcome in someone who was gay? What kind of Master do we think we serve? Is it not the one who has showered us with love? Is it not the one who heaps upon us mercy and grace, not heavy burdens that destroy people's lives?

"Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy-burdened, and I will give you rest."

This is our Master. And our Master has placed this absurd gift of unconditional, self-less love into our hands. Will we keep it all to ourselves, or will we risk it all as we multiply and multiply the love of God?

The more risks of love we take, the more abundance of love we create, so that when our Master returns, we will be surrounded by all the love we've created, all the people we've welcomed, all the risks we've taken for the least of these, and our Master will look at us and say, "Well done, good and trustworthy servant. Enter into the joy of your master." Amen.