

TAKE A CHANCE ON GOD'S REALM

I have never really liked this parable. Perhaps, I just haven't been able to get it. Some many parts of it just strike me as fundamentally at odds with the God in whom I believe, Jesus whom I follow and the Christian faith I profess. For starters, if we are to equate God with the master who entrusts his servants with some of his money then goes away for a "long time" as we are told only to return to give his servants a pop quiz that they weren't told to anticipate, what sort of God is that? Well, the third servant apparently thinks the master is a "harsh man" and that seems to be reinforced by how the story plays out.

That poor one-talent guy really gets it in the end, doesn't he? Sure, we might fault him for acting out of fear, but his fear seems to be justified. All he did was try to preserve his master's money – not take any risks with it. The first two servants manage to double the master's money but imagine what risks they must have taken to manage that? What if the market had tanked, crops had underperformed, political unrest had shaken things up, or a pandemic had occurred? They could have ended up with less than what they had to begin with. What would have the master have said to that?

There are other elements of this story that stretch its believability. The amount of money the master entrusts to the servants is ridiculously huge. A "talent" is the equivalent to 15 years of wages for a day laborer. It was a silver coinage that weighed between 57 and 74 pounds. It was equal to 6,000 denarii. It was a very large sum of money, and the first servant was given 5 talents! Can you imagine someone entrusting you with that kind of wealth before going out of town for a while? Just as the limo starts to pull away from the mansion, he puts down the window and says to you, "Be a good chap and take good care of my savings. See you when I get back."

I think part of our problem is that it is easy to apply our modern day capitalistic understandings to this story without realizing we are doing so. We can hear this story and rationalize the master's actions thinking that of course the servants should have invested what was entrusted to them – after all, isn't that what you're supposed to do with large sums of money? You don't need to be an investment banker to do that. Just put the money in a good, diversified mutual fund. How hard can that be? Besides, who buries money in the ground – that's nuts.

However, that is not what the original hearers of this story would have thought. For starters, they would have heard enough parables to know that when someone goes on a journey with the intention of returning there is good reason to believe that some sort of test is involved. They would have anticipated some sort of reckoning. According to biblical scholars, the return on the investment by the first two servants was not necessarily unusual in that time. Neither was the behavior of the third servant. His decision to hide the money in the ground would have been seen as prudent and trustworthy. He carefully guarded the money and if it had been lost he would not have been liable. To original hearers of this story, the third servant was acting responsibly.

Given that the third servant was the “one talent” guy original hearers would have tended to identify with him and the story sets us up to align ourselves with the third servant. After all, who among us has ever been or can even imagine being entrusted with so vast a sum as the 5 talent guy (that would be equivalent to 75 years’ worth of labor)? And who among us would be willing to risk so vast a sum by investing with the hopes of doubling that money? And yet, that is what our present economic system holds out to us as a possible dream. We can all be Bill Gates, or Jeff Bezos, or Warren Buffet. If you haven’t yet accomplished that you must be either lazy or stupid. It’s all part of our love/hate relationship with wealth. We are envious of those who have an abundance of it yet we don’t really want to penalize them for it since sometime, if we just play our cards right, that might be us. We equate financial success with wisdom and virtue, forward thinking, imagination, shrewdness. And from that perspective it is but one small step to conclude that those who struggle financially are inept, lackluster, too risk adverse, and just not savvy. I think that’s why so many Americans are drawn to someone like Donald Trump who has the image of success and wealth. He must be clever. Figuring out how to avoid paying taxes just burnishes that image for some.

In our economy, we don’t place value on the one talent person. We’ve bought into the myth Horatio Alger and a pull yourself up by your own bootstraps mentality that blinds us to the systemic economic oppression that ensures that the vast majority of Americans will never be able to reach long term financial stability let alone untold wealth. We minimize or ignore how privilege works to give some individuals not just a leg up but multiple legs up throughout their lives. And once you’ve got wealth, our system helps ensure you keep it through a taxation system that favors those who can afford to have investments. The system is rigged and yet we still hold out hope that we can rise above it. No wonder we both identify with the one talent guy and at the same time are not terribly surprised by his fate and the master’s actions.

The problem with this parable is that we hear it from within a capitalistic society and largely with the privileged ears of those with some experience and ability with navigating the market and dealing with commodities even if we don’t own stock. How would those stuck in the lower levels of our economy hear this story? How does it speak to those who barely have sufficient talents to make ends meet? Why would you risk what little that you had when your experience has been that everywhere you turn the system is stacked against you? When you are viewed as a thing - an anonymous “worker” a “consumer” a “troop” instead of a unique and valued human being what would motivate you to trust in the economy?

How might we hear this story as a person of color who assess risks every day that those of us with lighter skin never need take a moment to think about - the traffic stop, browsing in a store, eating at a restaurant, how you’re going to travel from point A to point B?

Stepping beyond the parochialism of our nation, how might those in third world countries, those whose resources and very lives are so often exploited by first world countries, hear this story? Countries whose assets are regularly looted by others or exploited to prop up petty despots?

Where is the good news to be found in this story? As my friend and seminary classmate Audrey West has noted,

The punch line of the parable seems to be that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Is this a good riddle or a bad joke?

This parable always shows up around Stewardship Sunday. Perhaps we are to conclude that it is there merely to encourage good stewardship of all that God has entrusted to us. If you just bury the treasure God has given you in the ground how faithful is that? But as I've noted, the parable allows reveals some painful realities in a world, then and now, dominated by wealth and power. As Audrey West further notes:

The rich man has achieved his wealth at the expense of others—by “reaping where [he] did not sow, and scattering where [he] did not scatter seed.” The first two servants multiply his dishonesty. The third refuses to participate in this system of oppression, and for this refusal he is abandoned and condemned to a place of suffering.

Perhaps then the parable is about the risks of following Jesus. That opting out of world's perspective leads to sacrifice.

Maybe we need to step outside of our assumed economic framework to really hear this story. Maybe this parable is about “investing” in God's kingdom/kingdom/realm. All that we have has been entrusted to us by a God who is extravagant with grace, who reaps where God did not sow, who gathers where God did not scatter. How are we employing all that we have, however many talents, to forwarding God's kingdom?

Let us not forget what immediately follows this parable: The Great Judgment, the sheep and goats, “whatever you did for the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Mt 25:40). Living into our world in counter-cultural ways, attending to the least and the lost risking respectability, status, forsaking wealth for the benefit of others, challenging a system designed to protect and benefit a few at the expense of the many, working for true and lasting peace, in our relationships, in our communities, in our nation, in our world are these not all “investments” in God's kingdom? Risky? You bet. Aligned with God's risky, extravagant, effusiveness? You bet. For sake of all of our communities – our church community, our Oberlin community, our world community – may we be bold in risking our generosity for the sake of God's realm: our financial generosity, our relational generosity, our generosity of grace, and peace, and joy and forgiveness, and love. As trusted, as beloved by God, let us love...

AMEN.