

The Reckless Abandon of Those Who Believe
Exodus 4:10-17
Matthew 25:14-30

“...I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.”

Heading out of town on a journey, a man summons his slaves and entrusts his property, his talents to them. To be clear, these talents are neither the fruits of his special abilities nor the objects of his peculiar passions—not his award-winning garden, say, or his well-equipped kitchen or his extensive collection of Picassos. *Talanta*, in Greek, means literally an immense amount of money. Thinking in inflationary terms, one *talanta* would be akin to the bonus of a bank’s CEO or the jackpot from Saturday night’s Powerball or a stack of gold bars. Imagine yourself a member of the janitorial staff, called into the office of the head of the corporation and given responsibility for an enormous amount of money: five times the earnings of a lifetime or double what you would make if you never retired or even just the equivalent of your entire life’s earnings. Then, without a word of instruction or inkling about how long he might be gone, the man walks away.

What to do with what belongs to the master in the meantime, in the time between his leaving and his return? You can sort of see where this is going. If, as was the case last week, we take the characters in the parable not as individuals but as the church, then the question placed before our common life this morning by Matthew’s third parable is this: What are we, as Christ’s church, to do with what has been entrusted to us between the resurrection and the *parousia*, between his first coming and the day when we shall see him face to face?

First a word on what *has* been entrusted to us: the actual *talanta*, evoked by the parable’s talent, surely stands for the gospel, the story of the inconceivable, unimaginable, humanly impossible news that God was in Christ, that death has been defeated, that the distance we have

kept from the One for whom we were made has ended in a manger and on a cross. To be entrusted with this news for the sake of the world is to be summoned by God's address and given something of immense value to sing and say and do in the world.

Before we go on, two uncomfortable distinctions probably need to be made and are best made with the help of our friend Robert Jenson. On the one hand, he observes, there are *many* things that need saying and doing in the world. "...if the gospel is true," he says, "it is one of them—and only one....The gospel is not necessarily 'more' or 'less' important than other good words, only different, with its own individual import." On the other hand, "The [word entrusted to the church] is a specific word; if the church does not get *this* word said, all the other words it might say are better said by someone else." Put another way, old-fashioned personal morality and new-fashioned social activism belong to the good work of humanity, work that we share with all people of different words. "The church is by no means the good's only instrument." But, "the church's specific mission is to act on those particular possibilities and hopes that are plausible if and only if what the gospel says about Jesus...is indeed true": if and only if death is defeated; if and only if he is alive and present and endlessly surprising us by where he appears and with whom. So the *talanta* entrusted to the church in the time between is the gospel.

Back to the parable! The man gives five *talanta* [the year-end bonuses of five CEOs!!!] to the first slave, two to the second slave and one to the third slave: each according to his ability. In all three cases, an enormous sum is handed over with the same expectation of responsible caretaking until the man returns for a reckoning. When I think of the history of the church in relation to the gospel entrusted to her, a history that had just begun as Matthew sat down to write his gospel, I must confess with Jens that it is a history of "telling and mistelling, believing and perverting, practice and malpractice." No doubt some communities have been entrusted with

more or less to say grace over based not on the potential for fiduciary responsibility but on the master's inexplicable foreknowledge of the community's faithfulness.

The first two slaves immediately go out and do what is necessary to double what had been entrusted to them. Had I asked John Lawton or Mark Nottingham or Brian DiDonato what such a return would entail, they likely would have mentioned the Rule of 72. In the wealth management industry, this refers to the risks you must be willing to take to double your investment. John Buchanan, the minister of Fourth Presbyterian in Chicago, did consult a money manager in his congregation who told him that if your investment has a guaranteed interest rate of 5% [dream on!], then five into seventy-two equals fourteen and a half years. "If you inquire about how risky this is," Buchanan goes on, "you will learn that if you want to double your money quickly, the risk escalates dramatically. In the world of venture capital, only about one out of four or five—some would say one out of ten—makes it. The other times you lose—everything." Much as I righteously would like to question a parable that lauds money making money on money, I am more grateful than I can say for the endowment and the committee that invests it! Still, I would prefer to characterize the actions of the first two slaves by way of the words of Ulrich Zwingli, the fiery Swiss reformer, who spoke of the "reckless abandon of those who believe." The first two acted with reckless abandon, doubling what had been entrusted to them against all odds.

Not surprisingly, it is the third slave that occupies the greatest part of the parable. His actions are first reported without comment: he goes off, digs a hole in the ground and hides his master's money, a common practice in Matthew's time. Only later, as he stands face to face with his master, do we hear the reason or the excuse for his prudence. It was the master's harshness and unjust behavior, he says, that made him fearful and led him to hide his one *talanta* in the

ground. “Here,” he says cynically in the end, “have what is yours.”

The safe but unused *talanta* is returned grudgingly, joylessly and in the belief that the money belonged to the slave in the first place. After all, it was by the sweat of his brow that the master came to accumulate his fortune. A stranger to gratitude, he views his master as a taker, not a giver, as a tyrant rather than an inconceivably gracious and trusting master. Multiply this by the rolls of any given congregation and you have a community that is somber to the point of joylessness, miserly and petty when it comes to the details of its common life, careful and prone to preservation as regards the church’s tradition, fearful and calculating when it come to investing in the future. These are the obvious marks of a community full of servants convinced that the gospel belongs to the comfortable society of the saved, their own lives and maybe even the church’s life eternally secured, *just as it is*, until the doors are closed, the lights turned off, the outreach abandoned, and the property, along with the stalwarts who have resisted doing something new and brave to the bitter end, are turned over to an incredulous Master.

“You wicked and lazy Christians,” I imagine him saying at the culmination of history when the witness of the church has dwindled to a few bored and boring souls. “The least you could have done, if you thought all of this belonged to you, if you believed your life was your own to do with as you damn well pleased, the least you could have done was to invest a tenth of what was entrusted to you in my name so that the next generation might have a shot at bearing witness to the gospel, at being a community sent out to proclaim by word and deed that death shall have no dominion.”

By contrast, I imagine the first two slaves being downright giddy as they live in response to the inconceivable opportunity, the overwhelming responsibility, the unfettered freedom bestowed on them in the time between the master’s leaving and his return. “Well done, good and

trustworthy slaves,” says the master as he accepts what the slaves have grown for him. Though here is the fine print: in the end, each slave is judged not on what he has, but on what he has done with what he has been given.

We too are servants who have been given an inconceivable opportunity, an overwhelming responsibility, the unfettered freedom to risk it all for Christ’s sake. Playing it safe is not an option if it is the gospel we mean to sing and say and do in the world. Yet the personal decisions we make concerning what to do with our own lives and the resources that have been entrusted to us until the kingdom comes determine what this community will dare for the sake of the gospel until the Master returns. According to one of most engaging interpreters of church history and doctrine I know anything about, David Steinmetz, “There is no responsible use of the gifts of God which does not involve taking risks....I never grow as a human being,” he says, “unless I cross the safe boundaries I have set for myself already and make myself vulnerable to failure, rejection, and loss.” Each of us knows this personally; and surely, after all these years together, we know this as the church. What could we dare together if each of us were to cross the safe boundaries, if we were to be made vulnerable by what we give away?

My imagination is presently taken with a story in Thursday’s paper about young people in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico’s most violent border city, where “the public cemetery is putrid and overflowing, and where a handful of churches worship the skeletal saint of death, Santa Muerta. But recently at crime scenes and busy corners, more than a dozen angels have appeared—10 feet tall with white robes and wide feathered wings. The fact that these angels are mostly teenagers from a tiny evangelical church on a dirt road makes their presence no less striking,” writes the reporter. “They carry signs....that say, ‘murderers repent.’” Standing on folding metal chairs for extra height, their robes flowing to the ground, they are vulnerable but not afraid: living as

though death had no dominion. I think, sans robes and wings, the same witness is borne by this congregation's Community to End Gun Violence; I think, *with robes and wings*, this witness is borne to a dying denomination by the herd of little ones storming up the aisle on Christmas eve like a multitude of the heavenly host; I know this witness was borne by eleven of our junior highs last Saturday as they delivered mattresses to squalid, one room apartments in Kensington. All of the church's "faith and love, all its confession and works, are nothing at all without daring," wrote Karl Barth of this parable. In a community such as this, daring begins with making use of what has been entrusted to you for the sake of the gospel that has been entrusted to us.

But one last question remains: what if the slaves who risked it all had lost everything, even their lives? "What if" questions are usually pointless unless the one telling the story is the one who alone did risk it all, emptying himself, taking the form of a slave, losing it all, including his life, that we might have life abundant. The witness of this church to the gospel, in the time between, is in our hands. *Tell me, what is it we plan to do with our one wild and precious life together?*