

Rev. Shannon Johnson Kershner  
November 16<sup>th</sup>, 2008  
33<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Matthew 25:14-30

### Christian Waiting

My family spent last 4<sup>th</sup> of July in Houston. At the last minute, my mother-in-law convinced us that it would be fun to pile in the car and go see the fireworks show. And, don't tell her, but she was right. It was fun. The best part was, of course, the finale. The fireworks started going off in rapid-fire sequence filling the air with sparkles and colors and loud booms of noise. I looked over at some children in the crowd to see what they thought. Many of the kids had their hands over their ears, looking at the show with an expression of both fear and excitement. Every fireworks finale is like that – bam, bam, bam, bam. It is big and loud and if you don't like loud noises, it can fill you with both excitement and a good dose of fear.

Matthew is executing his own finale with this part of the Gospel<sup>i</sup>. Matthew has structured his gospel so that Jesus' teaching ministry ends with four dramatic parables that drive home the demands of discipleship as we await Jesus' return--- bam, bam, bam, bam. These parables are big and emotionally earsplitting; **and**, if you don't like thinking about the life of faith as demanding, then they will fill you with a strong dose of fear. In fact, your first reaction in hearing them may be to imitate the kids and put your hands over your ears to mute the theological impact.

Take today's parable. It is dangerous. It has the potential to invert our world and change our lives. Now, I could interpret Jesus' story to mean that God gives everyone a gift, a talent, and we need to use it wisely without wasting it. We could talk about spiritual gifts or the time and talent surveys that you turned in last week with your pledge cards. But, I am not convinced that how we use our individual gifts and talents is what is at stake here.

When Jesus says talent in this parable, he is not talking about the ability of a person to play the piano, or sing, or add numbers in her head. A talent is a financial description. In this parable, we are in the realm of economics—frankly, a realm many of us do not want to be in these days. Now, the ancient world did not have our complex financial markets, but it knew about investments, profit, and loss. Money was powerful then, too<sup>ii</sup>. Why else do you think Jesus talks so much about it?

In those days, one talent was equal to about 15 years worth of work at a normal wage. So when the master gives the slaves 5 talents, or 2 talents, or even just one talent, the master is being extremely generous with his money. Those who were listening to Jesus tell this parable knew that implicitly. They could not imagine a master trusting his slaves with so much money. That was not how the world worked. Plus, Jesus never indicated that the slaves had to give back the money nor its profits. The listeners must have been stunned with the master's overwhelming generosity that seemed to expect nothing in return. With his words, Jesus painted a picture of the master as extraordinarily trusting, generous, and benevolent.

And, given the reactions of the first two slaves, they must have come to the same conclusion. Did you hear how Matthew put it? When the one slave received the five talents, AT ONCE he took off to make them work. When the next slave received the two talents, he did the same thing. They did not wait around, wishing that the master had left detailed instructions on how to invest, where to invest, etc. Jesus is clear: The master gave them the money. The master left. And without a second thought, those two servants went to work.

I am struck by their immediate action. Their behavior shows that for some reason, even though they belonged to the master, they felt free. That sense of freedom is obvious. Those of you who deal with money and investing on a regular basis know for a fact how difficult it is to double your money. It clearly requires taking a whole lot of risk, maybe even risking your entire initial investment. You have to be very adventurous to try and do that. You must assume that you have the freedom to fail if you are going to have a chance of success in such a shaky venture. So clearly, the first two slaves felt they had that freedom to fail or to succeed. They could risk it all, on the off-chance it might really work. And work it did! They each doubled their initial investment.

Apparently, the master was gone for a very long time. And yet, neither slave got nervous or rethought his investment plan. They just kept taking risks, being as faithful as they could, trusting that it would all work out by the time the master returned. And when the master found them again, they each joyfully showed him their investment portfolios. And the master was pleased. “Well done good and trustworthy slave,” the master proclaimed. Then, he gave them even more responsibility and invited them into his presence to stay. Being invited into the master’s presence was even better than keeping the money. These two servants had done well. They had lived in the confidence that their master was trustworthy, faithful and generous.

And that kind of outlook freed them up to take all kinds of risks and to live boldly. And as a result, they discovered the master was even more trustworthy, even more faithful, and ever more generous than they had first imagined. What a wonderfully happy ending for these two confident servants.

The end? Not yet. Alas, there is more to Jesus’ parable. For lurking around the fringes of all that happiness is the one talent slave. Like the first two slaves, he, too, acted as soon as the master left. But he did not run off to the marketplace to put the money to work. He went off by himself, dug a hole in the ground, and buried it. It is a stark contrast from the other two, isn’t it! Why did he act so differently? Why didn’t he have the freedom to take risks and to venture out boldly? What weighed him down and caused him to skulk away by himself?

We discover a clue when we listen to how that slave responded to the Master’s return. “Master,” he says, “I knew 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. Here you have what is yours.” Now, given what we have already seen in this story, doesn’t that characterization of the master seem odd to you? Nowhere in the story do we see the master painted as a harsh extortionist.

Clearly this servant's perception of the master was very cloudy, to say the least. The other two servants felt freedom, but he felt captivity. They saw generosity, but he saw a trick. They ventured out boldly, risking it all for the sake of a great return, but he decided to play it safe, concerned only with protecting himself. They were buoyed by trust, but he was absolutely immobilized by fear.

And unfortunately for him, in this parable, his fear finally engulfs him. [By the way - this may be the point at which you want to put your hands over your ears.] In theological terms, this one talent slave gets the peevish little tyrant master he believes in<sup>iii</sup>. He insisted on viewing the master as oppressive, cruel and fear provoking. And that perception tossed him straight into the outer darkness, a place of despair and isolation I am sure he had been before.

Does his punishment catch you off guard? After all, he was only playing it safe. We can certainly understand that, can't we? Especially in this financial market, we are all playing it safe. He was merely trying his best to simply be harmless. We understand that conservative approach to the financial marketplace. But what might that also say about our approach to the marketplace of faith?

In this parable, Jesus is talking about more than just financial investment decisions. Perhaps he was also speaking about a **theological** economy. When we live in the confidence that God is trustworthy and generous, we discover more and more of that kind of abundant living. But if we live immobilized in the darkness of fear, we condemn ourselves, needlessly quivering alone, discovering even the little bit of life we had has atrophied and withered away.<sup>iv</sup>

As I indicated earlier, Matthew places this parable in the context of waiting for the kingdom. In this part of Matthew's gospel, in this teaching finale, if you will, Jesus weaves together story after story about waiting for God's fullness of time. With the dramatic bam, bam, bam, bam of these four parables, Jesus is trying to help the disciples imagine how they were going to live in this world until he came back to make all things new. He is trying to help them, help us, imagine what faithful waiting looks like and feels like. Remember, in this parable, the master was gone for a long time. The servants had to live in that in-between space of waiting—a space that mirrors our own reality. So in that reality of living in the in-between times, what does faithful Christian waiting look like?

According to this parable, faithful Christian waiting is not passive. It does not look like simply playing it safe, burying your faith in a hole because you are scared. This parable unveils a waiting that involves taking initiative and risk. It involves venturing out into the marketplace confident that God really is as good as Jesus says. Confident that the One who will return really is even more trustworthy, even more faithful, and even more generous than you first imagined. Christian waiting involves boldly taking risks. Our eyes are wide open. Standing only on grace. Freely reaching out into the world past all fear<sup>v</sup>. According to this parable, love and faith demand risk and demand that we move past the temptation of mere self-protection.

And this is precisely why the story is dangerous. It is precisely why you might want to put your hands over your ears to mute the theological impact. At least that is one way this parable impacts me. Frankly, the parable causes me to rethink much of how I behave as a person of

faith. Like last week's parable, this one also forces me to ask some questions: What am I willing to risk in discipleship? Am I governed by wanting to protect myself, playing it safe with what I say or preach? Do I fall into the temptation of only being concerned with safety and security? And it forces us to ask those same questions about our life as a congregation. How many faithful risks do we take as a congregation? Are we bold disciples, venturing out into God's world as a community of faith, or do we prefer to stay here, in the confines of a safe sanctuary, to let the world sort itself out while we play nice and hunker down.

Goodness- I understand the great temptation to play nice and hunker down, letting the world's chips fall where they may. We are a nation involved in two wars. We are in the middle of an important presidential transition. We are in what everybody says is an economic crisis. Our denomination is still taking win or lose votes over sexuality and ordination. Our own Presbytery is trying to figure out how to keep being church with fewer resources. Your own Session waits a bit nervously for the final pledge count so we can figure out if we will have to do major budget cuts for 2009 or not. I completely understand the great temptation to just come on Sundays, play nice, and hunker down, leaving the world out there for somebody else to deal with.

But after our immersion into this parable, this other world, I don't think we can be satisfied with that survival, isolationist perspective anymore. Our trustworthy, faithful and abundantly generous God calls us to do more than just survive. Until God comes to make all things new, we are called to unbury our faith and thrust it out there. We are called to take some risks, eyes wide open, boldly venturing out, standing only on grace. We cannot avoid it. For we say we are followers of Jesus. We want to do as he commanded.

Well, we might want to remember who is telling this story. He is the biggest risk taker of all. Jesus certainly could have played it safe, burying his mission in a hole in the ground, looking out only for himself. He could have stayed in the background. But he did not. Jesus stepped right out there, risking his life for the sake of the world. He stood up for all who had no voice. He fed the hungry, befriended the outcast, healed the sick. He called all people to repentance and newness. He embraced the freedom God gave him because Jesus knew that God was even more trustworthy, even more faithful, and even more generous than we have imagined. And those risks led Jesus straight to the cross, into the grip of death. But those risks also led him straight through death, breaking its grip and power once and for all, bringing him back into the fullness of God from whence he came. Our Jesus, our brother, our Savior, was not in life for survival or self-preservation. He was in it for the kingdom.

This parable is dangerous. It can invert our world and change our lives. May it be so with you and with me, with Woodhaven and with the Presbyterian Church USA. Let's not just live to survive. Let's live for the kingdom, risking whatever we must, for the fullness of God. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Peery, Rev. Pen. Pastor at FPC, Shreveport. This image was shared in the Spring meeting of the Portable Snack, 2008.

<sup>ii</sup> William Loader, [www.staff.Murdoch.edu.au/loader/MtPentecost26.htm](http://www.staff.Murdoch.edu.au/loader/MtPentecost26.htm).

<sup>iii</sup> Long, Tom. Matthew. Westminster Bible Commentary. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press. 1997, page 283.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid.