

Response-Ability
Matthew 25:14-30
November 16, 2008

You, like, I have probably heard the parable of the talents before. We've heard it used as a stewardship sermon, encouraging folks to give generously and not to hoard their wealth, keeping it to themselves. We've heard it as an encouragement to share the skills and gifts that we have been given, using them to enhance the ministry of the church. I've heard of several churches that take \$10,000 and distribute \$20 or \$50 to each parishioner, charging them to invest that money in such a way that it brings returns and benefits to the church. I considered that option, but I figured that if I ask for that much money right now, the Finance and Endowment Committees would throw me into the outer darkness! In my studies last week, I saw this story in a new way.¹

First, let us consider when the story is told in Matthew's rehearsal of Jesus' life story. Jesus tells this story during the last few days of his life. Earlier he had made the risky decision to leave the safety of rural Galilee where he was among his own people and where his message was well received. He set out for Jerusalem, the capital city, where the religious authorities regarded him as a threat to the status quo and to their own power and privileges. Jesus entered Jerusalem at the time of Passover, with hundreds of other Jewish pilgrims. Roman soldiers moved into Jerusalem in great force to protect the city from protagonists like Jesus who might disturb the peace. It was a dangerous time for Jesus to appear in Jerusalem. His friends tried to talk him out of it. Once there their worst fears seemed to be confirmed. As Jesus entered into the city, a crowd of poor people had a noisy street demonstration, calling attention to Jesus' presence with their shouts of "Hosanna!" To make matters worse, Jesus went directly to the temple where he had an altercation with the moneychangers. The religious authorities were already talking to the Roman officials about getting rid of him. This is the setting in which Jesus tells a story.

A wealthy man goes away on a long journey. Before he leaves, he distributes his property to three slaves. It is a great deal of money. In the biblical world, a talent is a weight, about 34 kilograms. It was the equivalent of 6,000 denarii or—imagine this—16.5 years worth of wages. Thus, the man given five talents has far more than a lifetime's worth of wages. Jesus says that each is given according to his ability. The story focuses on the response of the three servants to what is entrusted to them.

The first slave takes the money to the market, to a wealth management firm, and invests in high-risk ventures. The second slave does the same thing, puts the money to work at high risk. Both do very well. When their master returns, he is very pleased. "Well done," he says. He promises that they will receive more responsibility in the future.

The third slave takes a very different approach with his money, his one talent. He hides it in the ground for safekeeping. He is not a bad man. He is a prudent, careful, cautious investor. He recognizes that his master is a harsh man. He has witnessed him seizing the assets and life savings of the little people without a second thought. The third slave is not willing to take chances with the master's money. So he buries it. When the master returns, he returns the same amount, not having lost an ounce. For his cautious approach, the worker is accused of wickedness and laziness. The money entrusted to him is taken away and given to the other two servants. He is scolded as worthless and kicked off the property.

If Jesus were telling the parable today, we might venture to guess that the story would have a different ending. It would not be the first two servants who invested in the stock market

and California real estate who would be receiving the accolades of the master, for instead of doubling their investment, today their investments may have been cut in half. Today it appears that the servant who hid the one talent in a hole in the ground is the wiser one, for although he did not gain anything, neither did he lose any of the original principal. However, I'm not sure that we can make that assumption. The point of the parable is not about doubling your money and accumulating wealth. It's about living. It's about investing. It's about taking risks. It's about responding appropriately to what we've been given. It's about seizing the abilities we have to make a difference.

At this critical juncture in his life, Jesus could slip away into the safety and isolation of the Galilean countryside. Instead he takes the risk of meeting his challengers face to face, of using his ability to respond nonviolently to their threats in order to model a more excellent way of living. Through this parable he is trying to prepare his disciples to keep walking the way he has taught even after he is gone. He will soon be the master who has gone on a long journey and will not return for a very long time. In the meantime, the disciples are left behind and have the freedom to choose their response in his absence. He wants them to continue to be faithful to their master, to follow his teachings, to invest their lives as he has, even to the point of taking risks. He doesn't want them to bury their faith, to stop caring, and to play it safe. He doesn't want them to squander their ability to respond to the concerns of their neighbors or the traumas of the world. He wants them to care so deeply that they respond with all of their ability.

Jesus' concern might be what the ancient church identified as sloth. In contemporary times, sloth is a word often translated as laziness. The Greek word for sloth is *acedia*, which is more appropriately translated as "not caring." It is a lack of passion, enthusiasm, and energy for life. It is manifested as depression, cynicism, sadness, boredom, listlessness, or couch-potato-itis. Basically it is apathy and indifference. It is not caring, not loving, not rejoicing, not living up to the full potential of our humanity, playing it safe, investing nothing, digging a hole, and burying the treasure in the ground.

Why is this important? Historians observe that whenever totalitarianism of any kind rears its ugly head, it's because ordinary people have stopped caring about the life of the community and the nation. Our nation has gone through such periods of such apathy and disengagement.

Vaclav Havel, a writer who spent time in prison as a dissident and then after the collapse of the communist state was elected President of the new Czech Republic said, "The salvation of this human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart...in human responsibility.... Responsibility to something higher than my family, my time, my country, my success."ⁱⁱ

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a martyr executed by the Nazis a few days before the end of the Second World War said, "The sin of respectable people is running from responsibility."ⁱⁱⁱ Bonhoeffer refused to ignore the genocide of Nazi Germany. Even as a pacifist he took his own responsibility so seriously that he joined the resistance movement and helped plan an assassination attempt on Hitler's life. His sense of responsibility cost him his life.

How important is Response Ability in terms of how we, you and I, live our lives? Jesus' warning is that the outcome of playing it safe, not caring, not loving passionately, not investing yourself, not risking anything, is something akin to death, like being banished to the outer darkness.

Madeleine L'Engle recalled a line from T.S. Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock, "Do I dare disturb the universe?" L'Engle calls Jesus a "universe disturber," observing that it got him crucified. To follow Jesus' way is to be a universe-disturber, to ask, "Dare I be one?" "It's a question we need

to ask with courage, “ she says, “as we look at what’s going on around us in the world with wars in the name of religion accelerating all over the planet, each group claiming to represent the Truth, and occasionally proclaiming it with acts of terrorism.” Playing it safe “leads to personal diminishment and death.”^{iv} That’s how personally important it is.

For most of us religion, our personal faith, has not seemed like a high-risk venture. In fact, it has seemed to be something of the opposite. Faith has seemed to be a personal comfort zone. We assume that faith is about personal security, that it is supposed to make us feel good even if the world is in turmoil and others are suffering. We think that faith is no more risky than believing ideas in your head about God and Jesus. We’ve been taught that faith is about getting your personal theology right and living a good life by avoiding bad things. It’s a pretty timid, non-risky venture.

The disciples were probably as surprised as we are to learn that faith is really about getting outside of ourselves. It is about using the abilities we been given and making a faith-filled response to the people, the circumstances, the challenges life presents us. Faith is about acting responsibly, utilizing the gifts of life for the benefit of others. It is risky business, making investments in order to make a difference in the world.

In essence, Jesus was preparing his disciples for his departure, saying, “It’s up to you to continue the mission when I’m gone. You can’t just go back to your fishing boats in the friendly security of Galilee. This pathway you are on is about seizing the opportunities given you to respond in faith. It’s about investing your lives, not scurrying for safety. It is about plunging ahead, taking the risk of speaking out, of putting it all on the line. It’s time for you to take responsibility.”

Friends, the master Jesus, is still on a long journey, and we are now the ones entrusted with caring for the faith in his absence. Each of us has been given various abilities with which to faithfully respond to life. Discipleship is about investing our gifts and our lives in the ministry of Jesus, in the multitude of ways it presents itself. It is to experience renewed responsibility for the use of these precious lives of our. It is to know ourselves as responsible for the lives of those dear to us and the life of the community and nation and world. It is to be bold and brave, to reach high and care deeply. It is to hurt when brothers and sisters hurt, to be impatient and angry at injustice, to weep at the world’s brokenness and rejoice at its goodness and beauty.

In *Man and Superman* George Bernard Shaw wrote, “This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being a force of Nature instead of a feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.”

And then Shaw looked ahead to that time of completion and ending, the time of summing up which we all will face one day: “I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no ‘brief candle’ to me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.”

The true joy in life is being used for a purpose mightier than oneself. That’s the joy the master offers to those who use their abilities to respond to the opportunities life presents.

ⁱ Thanks to Rev. John Buchanan, Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, Illinois, for this fresh perspective.

ⁱⁱⁱ Vaclav Havel, “A Joint Session of the U.S. Congress,” February 21, 1990.

ⁱⁱⁱ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (San Francisco: Harper, 1954), p. 11.

^{iv} Madeleine L’Engle, *A Stone for a Pillow*, p. 84.

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