

Stephen Shaver

Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

November 19, 2023

Year A, Proper 28, Revised Common Lectionary

[Judges 4:1-7](#)

[Psalm 123](#)

[1 Thessalonians 5:1-11](#)

[Matthew 25:14-30](#)

+ + +

There's never just one way to read a parable.

Is this master God? Is he Jesus? Is he a very human, capricious landowner? We can get benefit out of reading this parable any of these ways. Today I want to suggest that we hear this parable not as being about success, but about faith. Not about working hard and getting rewarded, but about trusting a God who's generous and loving whether we succeed or fail.

Consider the master in this story. He puts enormous sums of money into his servants' care. A "talent" here has nothing to do with the English word "talent" meaning skills like singing or telling jokes. It's a sum of money that would be worth something like several hundred thousand dollars today—so even the servant who only gets one is holding a huge amount. And then he goes away without so much as giving instructions about what they should do with it.

Two of the servants accept the faith he puts in them, and they show faith in return. They take a risk, and their risk pays off. One commentator has pointed out that the fact that each of them exactly doubles his money suggests that the growth is in a sense automatic—it happens the same way that seeds bear fruit in some of Jesus’ other parables. It doesn’t depend on their skills or efforts, just on their willingness to trust.¹

But the third servant is different: instead of acting out of faith, he acts out of fear. Or rather, his fear makes him choose not to act at all. By burying his money in the ground, he avoids the possibility of loss by foreclosing on the possibility of gain. He doesn’t accept the faith the master has put in him—and he has no faith in the master. His image of God is a harsh, cruel one: “I know you are a harsh man ... so I was afraid, and I went and hid your money in the ground.” In the end he creates a self-fulfilling prophecy for himself. And he’s cast into the outer darkness. Let’s point out that the story doesn’t say he can never get out. And I’d like to believe that the Jesus who has stormed the gates of hell itself for us won’t let him stay there. But to step into the light, he may have to learn what it means to trust, and take a risk.

We aren’t told what the master would have done if any of the servants had ended up *losing* their money. But I’d like to think he would have been fine with that. After all, he says he would have accepted even the smallest amount of interest. It doesn’t seem that he’s invested in the outcome so much as in the servants’ willingness to try, to step forward in faith in response to the faith he’s placed in them.

¹ From a 2014 sermon by Charles Hoffacker, <http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/stw/2014/10/22/23-pentecost-proper-28-a-2014/>

When he congratulates the first two servants, our translation has the master say, “Well done, good and *trustworthy* slave.” A more familiar translation is “good and faithful”—and that’s actually a better translation of the word here. Because like the English word “faithful,” the Greek word *pistos* can have two senses. It can mean *trustworthy*, but it can also mean *trusting*. The master congratulates the first two servants, I think, not for being *worthy* of faith, but for *having* faith—being faith-full, full of faith. Whether they win or lose, they have enough trust in the master to risk it all.

Yesterday at our Imagine Incarnation workshop we prayed and worked together to discern possibilities for the future of our campus. We are stepping out on an adventure in faith. Today we are finishing up our fall pledge campaign when together we commit our money to support the ministry we will do together at Incarnation in the year ahead. We are stepping out on an adventure in faith. A week from Thursday we will celebrate our 150th anniversary service and the ways generations before us in this parish have stepped out on an adventure in faith, and how we are called to continue that journey, walking boldly, taking risks, trusting God.

It may have been Mother Teresa who said, “God calls us not to be successful, but to be faithful.” Like the servants, God has given us an incredible, lavish gift: the gift of new life in Jesus Christ. We didn’t do anything to earn or deserve it. And all God asks is that we not hoard that gift for ourselves, but share it with the world. It’s not up to us to multiply it—God can take care of that. All we’re called to do is live boldly and truthfully, not hiding our light under a bushel or hiding our money in the ground. What we’re called to do, in short, is to love. And as anyone who’s ever had a child, or a partner, or a friend, knows, you can’t love and play it safe. You can’t truly love someone without risking getting hurt. But the real disaster isn’t getting hurt, but failing to love at all.

Jesus didn’t play it safe when he came to live as one of us. He trusted God and gave everything away: power, glory, status, and in the end, even his life itself. And God repaid that trust, so that not only does Jesus live again, his life has been multiplied thousands and millions of times over. That life flowed into you and me when we were baptized into Jesus’ body. And it flows out through us every time we step out to follow him. How will that life flow out through you today? How will you follow Jesus by living boldly, taking a risk, and sharing what God has given you with the world?