

HIDING, SAVING AND SPENDING
MATTHEW 25: 14-30

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University Church of Chicago
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Life is hard. And anybody who tells you something different is lying to you. Those brands of contemporary religion that tell you to think positive thoughts or look for examples of sweetness and saintliness and all will be well are not worth the time it takes to read their tracts.

Life is hard on a superficial level as well as in the deepest reaches of despair. A report about a program of diet control conducted by the Rockefeller Institute reveals that it is not only harder to lose weight than to gain it, but it also shows that our bodies actually hurt when we try to reduce our intake of calories. A man who gains thirty pounds in twenty years, says the report, has taken in over 60,000 more calories than he needed. And to take weight off by reducing your intake by only 200 calories a day requires incredible willpower.

For those of us who weigh and worry, who exercise while trying also to exorcise the diet demons, the Rockefeller Institute report about metabolism and weight is discouraging. If I lose weight but my body is craving to be fat and my body adjusts its metabolism so that it's easier to put weight on than it ever was to take it off, what's the point? Life is hard.

Preaching on the Parable of the Talents in November is hard for the preacher. We are facing the issue of money today on Pledge Sunday, Stewardship Sunday, Commitment Sunday—whatever you want to name it. The easiest thing for the preacher to do today is intertwine responsible stewardship—which is what the parable is about—with making a sacrificial pledge to the church. But unfortunately that disparages stewardship and avoids the hard message of the parable.

Taking the Parable of the Talents at face value, the first two stewards do the wise thing: they have earned MBA's at the University of Chicago, so they trade in the free market. The servant who was given five talents earned five more talents. Similarly, the steward who was given two talents earned two more.

But what about servant number three? What is his problem?

He is not a dishonest servant who is out to defraud or deceive his master of whatever he could get. He did not embezzle the funds or swindle anybody.

Upon hearing this parable read, I imagine there is more than one person like me: somebody in the congregation is asking, What's so wrong about being cautious? Especially in these troublesome times when banks are crashing, law firms are firing hundreds of associates, the insurance industry is in crisis and we wonder what will happen next.

The problem with this third servant is that the virtue of caution becomes a vice. Prudence and wariness easily become self-protectiveness and restraint. Inhibition turns to fear and the servant refuses to risk anything.

Love demands risk. Anybody who has been married or is currently married will tell you that. Anybody who has tried to raise children knows about risk. And if you have ever attended a church meeting where people were trying to decide direction and purpose and mission, you know about risk.

Life is hard. We struggle with its miseries, both outward (like dieting) and inward (like depression and fear). The Bible, the most realistic of books, never backs away from illness, disease, calamity, disaster or death.

Two great calamities had plagued the life of Jesus' time--one a natural disaster that everybody remembered (much as we recall the recent hurricanes and, of course, Hurricane Katrina) and the other caused by the infamous Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate. Neither of these is explained or filled out in Luke's account, because he assumes that his readers have a good memory and that they are still dealing with the after-effects of the disasters.

The Galilee was not Jewish in Jesus' time; was, in fact, "pagan," ruled by Herod Antipas, the son and one of the heirs of Herod the Great. The Romans had given Antipas carte blanche to rule the area as he pleased, to extract whatever taxes he could and to purloin as much of the land as he could from the peasants. Antipas was not the builder his father had been, but he worked with the Romans to construct several large cities, most notably Sepphoris, just four miles from Our Lord's hometown of Nazareth.

Pilate kept his troops on the seacoast down at Caesarea, the city

that Herod the Great had built against all engineering odds. It was cooler down there, and he could stay out of the way of the revolutionaries and priests and Pharisees whom he did not understand and who plagued him for decisions he didn't want to make. He turned over the management of Jerusalem to Caiaphas and his cohorts, and Pilate and his troops only turned up for the high holy days when order had to be maintained. All those crazy Jews coming to the capital city had to be controlled.

The Galilee was a strange area, fraught with danger, bandits, brigands and cultic figures. Josephus, the Jewish historian who was a contemporary of Jesus, tells of Pilate's brutal attempts at control. The procurator had at one time crucified hundreds of revolutionaries, had put their crosses on both sides of a major highway and left them there for the vultures to eat away their flesh, left their bones to bleach in the Judean sun. In the north country, he apparently had been even more scornful of the faithful by mixing their blood with the sacrificial blood of the lambs.

So, Jesus confronts the question of theodicy. His response lets us know that those who came to him about the disasters assumed a **quid pro quo** system of divine reward and retribution--that is, those who died got what they deserved. Jesus rejects this interpretation. He tells the people bluntly that humans are sinners, and that from God's perspective the peril is equal for everyone. We cannot evaluate the spiritual condition of others (or ourselves) because we (or they) do or do not suffer.

Jesus stands the seeming sign of assurance of goodness on its head and calls for those who bore the disastrous news, for those who did not suffer and who seemingly assume that they are in God's good graces, to repent. In referring to the death of those upon whom a tower fell, he reinforces the point. We need to look to God, not to ourselves and our life experiences to find real security for living.

One of our bright, capable young adults approached me during the social hour after the All Saints Communion service. She wanted to know how much bread to dip into the chalice. "When I was a kid in my home church, we tore our share of the bread off a common loaf," she said. "So, on Sundays when I came to church after a week in which I thought I had been especially sinful, I would tear off a huge chunk. But at University Church, I've noticed that people tear off small chunks of bread. All our sins seem to be regarded as equal. I keep looking for a larger piece of the bread!"

Is sin equal for all of us? Does the murderer come to the Table with the same need of grace as the casual prevaricator? In the warning against fruitlessness in the parable of the fig tree, Jesus warns against what his sixteenth-century disciple, Martin Luther, would call "works righteousness." It makes clear that we do not maintain our relationship to God by virtue of our own achievements. Rather, in a striking way, the parable reminds us that whatever good we experience comes to us by the grace of God.

In giving us grace, God has purpose: we are to be "fruitful"--that is, our lives are to take on the characteristics that God intends. When we take advantage of God's grace yet bear no fruit--that is, when we simply live for ourselves with no observable benefit for God or others--God is displeased.

Still, God gives us room, time to grow and produce.

The final word from Jesus is that it does make a difference how we live. Our lives are evaluated by God. We are expected to take stock of our situation, and if we are not in synch with God's will we are to understand that God expects us to change. Moreover, God is working in us trying to change us.

One task of the Christian life is to turn knowing into doing. In the words of one of Rilke's poems:

"There is no place at all
That is not looking at you.
You must change your life."

We cannot live detached, objective lives without faith. Knowing and doing connect us with, to quote Rilke again, "the grace of great things."

A Doonesbury cartoon that somebody left on my desk is about the Little Church of Walden. The first frame shows the pastor sitting with a couple of prospective members. He asks them, "So what would you like to know about the Little Church of Walden, folks? Don't hold back--I know it can be difficult to choose a church." The man begins, "Well, what's the basic approach here, Reverend? Is it traditional gospel?"

The pastor replies, "In a way I like to describe it as twelve-step Christianity. Basically I believe that we're all recovering sinners. My ministry is about overcoming denial, it's about recommitment, about redemption. It's all in the brochure there."

The woman interrupts. "Wait a minute--sinners? Redemption? Doesn't that imply ...guilt?" The pastor answers, "Well, yes, I do rely on the occasional disincentive to keep the flock from going astray. Guilt's part of that!"

"I dunno," says the man. "There's so much negativity in the world as it is." His wife adds, "That's right. We're looking for a church that's supportive, a place where we can feel good about ourselves. I'm not sure this guilt thing works for us."

Looking down at the church brochure, the man reflects, "On the other hand, you do offer racquetball." His wife turns to him and says, "So did the Unitarians, Honey! Let's shop around some more."

I have a hard time liking arrogant, conceited self-righteous people. People who think they are better than others or are good because they are shrewd with money turn me off. I think most of us have learned in the past few months to doubt the "wisdom" of some of those speculators who have become filthy rich because they were at the right place at the right time.

"Let's face a historical truth," Howard Zinn said recently. We have never had a 'free market,' we have always had government intervention in the economy, and indeed that intervention has been welcomed by the captains of finance and industry. They had no quarrel with 'big government' when it served their needs."

If the \$700 billion bailout of Wall Street were paid out in \$100 bills, it would amount to a stack 54 miles high. Of if you were to count to 700 billion at the rate of one number per second, it would take 21,000 years. Note this fact also: in the fiscal year just begun the Pentagon will spend \$607 billion on regular military operations as well as another \$100 billion on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

I had a friend in college who used to say, "It's hard for a person to be humble when you are as talented as I am." What we need is some humility. What we need as a nation is to face the fact of our own hubris and what it has done to us.

Our Lord presupposes that faith is a relationship of trust in God. It is not mere assent to doctrines or traditions or feeling good about one's life. The decision is not just once and for all. The decision of faith has to be renewed regularly if it is to be authentic.

Here's the bad news: you and I are called to use our talents, gifts and money for Christian service, but like the third servant in Jesus' parable, we have been cautious, selfish, unfaithful. And here's the good news: despite our lack of fidelity, God is faithful. Through God's graciousness, there is still time--time to repent, time to change.

The parable makes clear what our alternatives are. To the one choosing security over risk, the Lord remains a hard master. But those who risk discover a Lord ready to share the delight of his presence and participation in his mission. They discover a link with the teller of the story, who knows all about risks and who gave everything for you and me.