

Matthew 25:14-30

25:14 "For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them;

25:15 to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away.

25:16 The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents.

25:17 In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents.

25:18 But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

25:19 After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them.

25:20 Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.'

25:21 His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.'

25:22 And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.'

25:23 His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.'

25:24 Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed;

25:25 so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.'

25:26 But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter?

25:27 Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest.

25:28 So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents.

25:29 For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.

25:30 As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

Judges 4:1-7

4:1 The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, after Ehud died.

4:2 So the LORD sold them into the hand of King Jabin of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor; the commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-ha-goiim.

4:3 Then the Israelites cried out to the LORD for help; for he had nine hundred chariots of iron, and had

oppressed the Israelites cruelly twenty years.

4:4 At that time Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel.

4:5 She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites came up to her for judgment.

4:6 She sent and summoned Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, "The LORD, the God of Israel, commands you, 'Go, take position at Mount Tabor, bringing ten thousand from the tribe of Naphtali and the tribe of Zebulun.

4:7 I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin's army, to meet you by the Wadi Kishon with his chariots and his troops; and I will give him into your hand.'"

Proclamation of the Word

A couple of months ago I watched the Ken Burns series, *The Roosevelts*, about Teddy and Franklin and the family that lead our nation for decades. Did some of you watch that?

I will confess I missed the last show due to a Clemson Football game. One of America's first families wrought with conflict, suffering and yet, they contributed so much to our nation. I admit I knew less about Theodore Roosevelt, the 23rd President, than I did about his cousin, Franklin Delano Roosevelt our 32nd President. But last year I had read a book whose title was based on a Teddy Roosevelt quote that stuck with me. The book by Brene Brown is entitled *Daring Greatly* who argues that people who risk and dare greatly do so because they are willing to be vulnerable. Great courage comes from great **vulnerability and risk**. Brown's title is based on this quote from Theodore Roosevelt.ⁱ

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.

Perhaps because of Teddy's cowboy persona, I sent this along to my nephew who is a cowboy and competes in National quarter horse Cutting competitions. But it speaks to all of us, cowboy or not, of daring greatly, taking risks, and having courage. It is easy to sit on the sidelines and critique and complain. It is more fulfilling and beneficial to get into the arena and try. Perhaps you know something of the fears that keep you from daring greatly. Perhaps you also know the great freedom of jumping into the arena and putting it all out there.

One thread that knits our two passages of Scripture together is how God uses faithful people who are willing to take risks for great purposes. So let's examine Jesus' parable of the Talents.

Laura Smith Conrad, Fort Hill Presbyterian, Pentecost 23A

When Jesus tells this parable he introduces 3 servants or slaves who are entrusted with buckets of gold. A talent was a large sum of money. Talent has evolved into meaning a skill or ability. But these servants were given much to invest, but each received differing amounts. The two who are praised are the two who take the risk and invest the money, doubling their investment. But the one who is rebuked is the one who played it safe and buried his treasure.

The wise Master entrusted that which he knew the servant could perhaps handle. The Master knew his servants. He was even willing to risk his treasure on the lesser servant, but was disappointed in the end. The servants who took action, who did something risky are the ones who receive the accolades of the master. Now, I have a heart for the servant who buried his treasure. I have never had large amounts of money. I was raised by a widow who was a financial secretary. So I resonate with the lesser servant. I imagine he thought he was being a good caretaker, a good steward. But in protecting and hiding the treasure, it did nothing. Nothing changed. No growth of the principal occurred. And disturbingly to me, he is treated harshly and cast into outer darkness.

Now we must remember Jesus is not preaching a Annual Stewardship drive sermon, although you are encouraged to make your pledge for the coming year. Jesus is speaking to the religious authorities in escatological terms right before they put him on trial and crucify him. Jesus suggests that when he returns in glory for the final judgment, they will be called upon to give an account for what they have done to serve the kingdom of God.

He suggests that sitting on the sidelines and being critical, stingy, and scared are unfaithful. Instead, the ones who are in the arena, taking risks, and putting it all out there even if they fail, are trustworthy. Perhaps Teddy Roosevelt had read this parable when he said,

...there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly...

God uses faithful people who are willing to take risks for great purposes.

Deborah and Barak are also examples to us of those who took great risks for God's great purposes. Deborah and Barak are faithful servant leaders for the sake of God's people. While the parable of the talents seems to focus on the individual servant, these are serving the community as God has called and equipped them to do. I notice several things about faithful servant leadership in this passage.

1. Deborah is revered for her wisdom and good judgment. Did you catch that one line? She used to sit under the palm of Deborah and the people would come to her for judgment, likely in the sense of mediation and arbitration. I love that detail, "She used to sit" for great wisdom grows out of thoughtful reflection and discernment. Deborah was likely a good judge because she took time to

ponder, to pray, to sit, before taking action. Faithful servants know when to sit, to discuss, to ponder and to pray before determining a course of action.

I witness this among the officers and leaders of Fort Hill church much of the time. You have entrusted faithful servants with leading the God's mission and ministries. Well-done. And I ask you to pray for those who are currently leading and will be preparing to lead us forward when you elect your new officers next Sunday.

2. Notice Deborah's introduction. She is called a "prophetess" and the "wife of Lappidoth." Usually in the Bible a name or descriptor tells us something of a person's character. So Simon becomes Peter, which means rock. Jesus said on this Rock I will build my church. Peter is that rock. So "wife of Lappidoth" is probably not just a note about to whom she is married to because in Hebrew "wife of Lappidoth" can mean "fiery or lightening" woman. In Hebrew "wife" and "woman" are the same word. And *Lappidoth* means lightening or fire. So we know that Deborah was a spitfire, a fireball. She is courageous, bold, daring. Notice that the military general, Barak, will not go into battle without her by his side. Great daring is a mark of a faithful servant.

3. And finally speaking of Barak, note that he is wise enough to know that he cannot do what he is called to do alone. He needs help, encouragement, and the wisdom and counsel of Deborah. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness, but wisdom. In a time when women in leadership was not the norm, Barak was brave to align himself with an able woman when others might critique him.

Nothing done for the glory of God can be accomplished alone. The people of God altogether are entrusted with the greatest treasure, the Good News of Jesus Christ. And we are called upon together to spread it, share it, enact it.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor-theologian, said that the sin of respectable people is to run from responsibility and risk. Bonhoeffer, a pacifist, ultimately gave his life because he determined to risk being involved in an assassination plot against Hitler and joined the Resistance. It cost him his life.

US Christians have sometimes been taught that faith is what makes us comfortable, safe, and happy. It is no more than believing the right things or hoarding God's grace and love all for ourselves. But the church is the *ecclesia*, the "called out," not the "called in."

Jesus said, come, follow me out into the world, not just into the synagogue, the gathering place. You can be my disciple and learn from me, but you must yoke yourself to me and let me lead and guide your everyday life.

Perhaps the greatest risk is to risk nothing for the sake of the gospel. To dig a hole and protect what we have been given. If Jesus came to bring life and life abundant, the real risk is not to be fully alive. God's desire is that we would know the interdependence of Christian community, and together to risk

much bring fullness of life to one another and those who most need good news. To play it safe, to not risk disappointment or loss, does nothing. To not care, to not invest, to not risk putting yourself in the arena and leaving it all on the field- is empty. There will be no growth, no witness, no "well-done good and faithful servants." And in the end finally, Christ will judge. To not risk and not invest is, in effect, more akin to death than fullness of life.

Anna George Traynham grew up here in our Presbytery and is now a pastor. In her blogⁱⁱ, she warns that the greatest challenge facing the church is to be the church in the world. The church isn't a building or a private club. The church is a people constantly being **called out** to participate in what God is doing. We are not "called in" to just be with others like us and take care of ourselves. We are called to be the church in the world. She writes, "We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses- to embody the Spirit of Steven in standing up for the faith, the compassion of Christ in the face of suffering, the listening spirit of Mary and the faithful diligence of Martha in the midst of our chaotic world. In the tradition of Amos and Micah, the church "calls out" the truth in love, bearing witness to the hope we know triumphs over despair. In the line of Samuel, we dare to notice God's voice in our lives and in the tradition of Miriam, we know when to take up our tambourines and dance."ⁱⁱⁱ In the example of Deborah and Barak, may we have the wisdom to know how to act and that we cannot serve alone. To be "called out" means to take risks based on who we know our God to be.

- We need to ask who are the lepers shunned by the world?
- Who are the tax collectors with whom Jesus would dine?
- Who are the women running from the tomb announcing the good news that we need to hear?

So the invitation stands, will you be a God's fiery man or God's fiery woman?

Will we take courage in the Holy Spirit and get into the arena where the kingdom of God is already growing and at work?

If the answer is yes, we may enter into the joy of the Master.

ⁱ "The Man in the Arena" Excerpt from the speech "Citizenship In A Republic" delivered at the Sorbonne, in Paris, France on 23 April, 1910

ⁱⁱ Anna George Traynham, "The Greatest Challenge Facing the Church Today." <http://ageorgetraynham.wordpress.com/2014/02/11/the-greatest-challenge-facing-the-church-today/>

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