

sermon-11/16/08 Newport Presbyterian Church
“When Playing It Safe Does Not Cut It”
Matt. 25:14-30
By Jim Patton

Jesus loved to tell parables. They can be a wonderful communication tool. They can also be very frustrating. Sometimes they leave us scratching our heads. Sometimes we think we know exactly what they mean, but we have missed the point entirely. One has to be very careful with parables.

As I have said before, parables generally have one point to make. What is the point of the parable of the talents we just read? We will get to that in a moment. First we need to understand the context. Jesus has been talking about the Kingdom or Commonwealth of God. He said in the parable before this the kingdom will be like ten bridesmaids. Five were wise and five were foolish. Now he says, “It is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them. . .”

The main point, then, must be about the Kingdom of God. In order to get to that point we must also remember we can't take the details in the parable literally. “Kristen Stendahl likes to tell the tale of the old Swedish Lutheran pastor who preached on (this) text to his elderly congregation of literalists, one of whom was worried about the fate of people similar to this servant who, like himself, no longer had any teeth to gnash. The pastor, not willing to undermine faith replies, “Teeth will be provided.”

While I am sure there are not many in this church worrying about having teeth to gnash, I am reminded of what Gradye Parsons, our new Stated Clerk of the PCUSA, said at the conference I went to last week. He said with all the bank troubles in our country, the one who put his talent in the ground is looking pretty good these days!

We must move beyond these literal details to get to the main point. Let's look at what Jesus says. He talks about a man who gave his slaves either five, two, or one talent. A talent was a huge amount of money. The one talent was worth fifteen years wages for a laborer. I figured out that someone working for minimum wage for fifteen years would make around \$254,000! That is nothing to sniff at. The one given three talents got around \$509,000. The one given five talents got around \$1,270,000! These slaves were given a ridiculous amount of money.

Later when Jesus says, “You have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things,” he must have had a twinkle in his eye calling all that money “a few things.” Certainly Jesus was putting money, even a great deal of money, into perspective by saying that.

Of course, this parable was not just about the use of money. The talent could symbolize many things. Some scholars would say Jesus was really talking about grace, or the gospel. The commonwealth of God is like being given a ridiculous amount of grace. The

real question becomes: what are we going to do with the grace we have received while we live on this earth, while we experience the commonwealth of God, however partially?

The first two use what they were given by taking chances with it and it doubles. The third buries it and loses even what he has. Note, none of the slaves were given any instructions as to what they are to do with the talents they were given. Faithful living in God's commonwealth is not just about following instructions, as one scholar put it. Certainly the Bible gives us a general outline, or some general rules, as to how to live, but living faithfully is more than a slavish obedience to rules.

The third slave was actually obeying the rules when he buried his talent. Wil Willimon says the law in that day said, "Whoever immediately buries property entrusted to him is no longer liable because he has taken the safest course conceivable." This third slave was just following the rules of prudent behavior.

Living in God's commonwealth is not, as one scholar put it, about always being prudent and wary. He says that can easily become "self-protectiveness and restraint." He goes on to say Jesus' love was neither prudent or calculating. He loved us in such a reckless way it led to his death on the cross. No, says this scholar, love invariably involves risk. That is true for marriage, for parenting, and for friendship. We make ourselves extremely vulnerable when we love another person.

Apparently living faithfully in the commonwealth of God is not satisfied by playing it safe. Another commentator goes even further. He writes, "We can bury God's grace beneath years of merely conventional living and comfort ourselves with that favorite sop of middle-brow morality that says: 'Well, after all, the important thing is to be a decent person.' We can forget that decent people bought slaves and sold them once on these very shores." No, faithful living in God's commonwealth is about something more than being a decent person.

Living in God's commonwealth is certainly not about being fearful. Once again Jesus warns us against making decisions out of fear. The third slave was afraid and acted accordingly. What did it get him? He ended up living in outer darkness. He could not experience the joy of God's presence, in other words. Living in darkness is in stark contrast to what Paul says in our other scripture passage where we are called to be children of light.

Living in God's commonwealth is all about living exuberantly, willing even to take risks. As Iranaeus, the early 2nd century father, said, "The glory of God is a human being fully alive." One does not become fully alive playing it safe and burying the talents, the grace given to us.

Tony Robinson, former pastor of Plymouth Congregational Church in Seattle says, "These stories and sayings both invite a deep trust and a wild risk, and expose our fears and their true cost." That is the main point of this parable of the talents.

This sermon was supposed to be my main fall stewardship sermon. What does all of this say about stewardship? I think it is pretty obvious. Amen