

**5 Practices of Fruitful Congregations:
Risk-Taking in Mission and Service
Mark 6:7-13 Matthew 25:14-30**

This morning's practice, of the 5 practices of fruitful congregations, is risk taking in mission and service. I'm going to also use the word *adventure* in mission and service, because risking can be looked at as adventuring.

We just heard a passage from early in Jesus' ministry where he sent out his disciples on a little mission trip—a little adventure, taking a risk to share a message and do some good work among the villages where they were travelling. This is the first of 3 excursions he sends them on over the years, each time a little different in what they do and what they are to take with them—or not take. In the passage we just heard he tells them to take, basically, nothing. Talk about risk! But they discover by the end that they actually had all that they truly needed: a message to share, skills/gifts for service, and authority from Jesus to go and do. And they were to rely on the hospitality of others for their basic needs. That's an important aspect of this risk-taking adventure: to go empty-handed so that they would learn to trust Jesus, and grow in confidence.

Our next passage from Matthew's gospel, a parable, comes at the *end* of Jesus' ministry, toward the end of Holy Week. And it's a parable of Jesus that is

tricky (more so than the other parables) and on the surface sounds troublesome. Taken at face value it reflects an ugly side of capitalism, with a shady character of a businessman that, at face value, could lead people to believe that it portrays God as a temperamental and demanding deity who expects others to enrich *him*. And that the kingdom of God is meritocracy-based—that is, we earn God’s approval by doing more, or doing better than others.

The good news is, beneath the surface reading of it, and read in the context of Jesus’ other parables and why he told them, and in the context of Jesus’ entire ministry, it actually reveals a gospel of grace and in a backwards kind of way is telling us that God is generous and invites us to take healthy risks with what we’ve been given. There are a couple other parables that sound somewhat like this one, where the God character is a kind of a jerk, but Jesus told those stories that way to make a point. I’ll explain in a moment.

Before reading this, a comment: in this parable it talks about investing talents. This is not like “America’s got talent” kind of talents. It isn’t a skill or ability or gift of some kind, and it isn’t a coin or a specific amount of money either. A talent was a unit, a weight of some precious metal, the value of it varying depending on the standard of the day. For example, if gold is worth \$3,000 per ounce today (which it was last Thursday when I checked) and if one

“talent” was one pound of gold, then that talent would be worth \$48,000 right now. And the worth of that talent would fluctuate and be worth more or less as the price of gold increases or decreases. Make sense?

That’s today. One talent in the days when Jesus told the parable you’re about to hear was worth about 15 years’ wages for the common laborer. That’s the standard they set. And it’s a lot! In today’s terms, if we say that’s 15 years’ worth of income *at minimum wage* (around \$20/hour) at 40 hours per week), that’s \$600,000. In today’s terms, that’s how much one talent was worth in Jesus’ day. The point is, that’s a lot!

This is a good time to remind us that Jesus used a lot of over-the-top, hyperbolic, even startling elements in his parables, for effect. He wanted to get peoples’ attention. And this parable will get ours! Here we go...

Matthew 25:14–30

“For it (“it” being the Kingdom of heaven) is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his servants and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. After a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them.

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. ‘His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful in a few things, I will put you in

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

'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; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours. 'But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy servant! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? (he doesn't deny it!) 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. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. 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. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

This is the word of the Lord.

That's a fun story, huh? Not a good bedtime story...Before we talk about the topic for this morning—risk taking/adventures in mission and service—a couple aspects of this parable need to be addressed, and clarified.

First, "weeping and gnashing of teeth" was a figure of speech back in the day, and it was a way of saying that someone had regret. This is not hell or eternal punishment, as it's often interpreted to mean. Jesus never says anything about hell or eternal punishment, if we take a moment and really examine what is said. It's a figure of speech, and, as I mentioned, this aspect of the parable is over the top and dramatic, as are several aspects of Jesus' parables. Just like some contemporary fiction writers have employed hyperbole and outrageous images in

their stories. It's their way of saying, "Here's a good example of a good example" and "Here's a good example of a bad example. You figure out which is which.

Having said this, the comments about outer darkness and weeping and gnashing of teeth *aren't actually Jesus' words*, as if *he* was speaking them to warn people about something. He put those words into the mouth of his main character in the story, and I'm not sure they are to be taken literally.

Which leads to a second comment, about the God character in the story. The master in the story is clearly the God character. Or maybe it's Jesus himself—because Jesus tells this parable toward the end of Holy Week, so he is about to go away and return, like the master in the story. Whether it's Jesus or God, the main character is described as harsh, and as reaping where he hasn't sown, and gathering where he hasn't scattered. In other words, he's a thief. He steals other peoples' goods and produce! And he seems kind of proud of it. And, he expects his servants to do what's necessary to enrich *him*; he intends to keep all of the gains from what his servants invested. So...what is Jesus saying here about who God is? Or who *he* is, if he is the master in the story?

Here is how we need to look at this character. He is, like many other aspects of Jesus' parables, again, an over-the-top, exaggerated, and somewhat startling caricature of a person, to make a point.

And this isn't the only parable that has a God character like this. Jesus tells a parable about a woman who pesters an unjust judge, a terrible man described as having no respect for or care about people or about justice; but because she pesters him day after day after day, she gets what she needs. Likewise, Jesus tells another parable about someone who has unexpected out of town guests that arrive late at night, and he doesn't have donuts and coffee to serve for breakfast, so he goes to his next-door neighbor's house to borrow some donuts and coffee. He knocks on the door, but his neighbor is a grouch and yells at him from inside to go away because he's already in bed. But the guy persists, and his grouchy neighbor finally gets up and gives him what he needs.

In all of these parables, Jesus is saying, in effect, if these people got what they needed from *those* terrible people, how much more will your *good* and *gracious* God (who is *not* like that; or I, who I hope you have discovered is not like that) give you what you need, or supply you with the "talents" so to speak, to use for serving *others*—not for making sure God is more personally enriched, but so *everyone* is enriched.

If there are persons in Jesus's stories who are awful, and Jesus says, "*Don't be like that,*" then there are God-figures in some stories and Jesus is saying, "*God is not like that.*" Or "*I am not like that.*" Therefore, you don't have to be afraid.

Like the guy in our parable was afraid, and was severely chastised for it and sent to the time out closet with the other bad boys and girls. God doesn't do that.

We could also look at it this way: there are many people, even some *Christians* today, who **do** see God this way—as harsh, as demanding, or who doesn't truly care about people or about justice, and this harsh and demanding God will get really mad at us if we don't do what he says. We may know people who see God that way, or perhaps at one time we have seen God that way, and have been afraid.

So what Jesus is then doing in these stories is painting a picture of how silly that belief is. It's as if he is saying *out loud* what some people are *thinking* to themselves, and believing, and he is saying, "Do you hear how ridiculous that sounds? In light of everything else I've taught you about how gracious and generous God is? I am?"

With that background I want to mine this parable for the gems of insight that Jesus presents—because there is a good message in here, related to what risk taking might look like for each of us, and for Christ's church.

So here are three brief observations from this parable, encouraging us in our serving and giving, as individuals and as a congregation—which includes the encouragement to be *risk takers and adventurers* in our serving and giving.

1. Notice that talents are given to *each person*. *Every person* gets something.

It doesn't say one person was given 5 talents, another 2, another 1, and

another person was given zero talents and was then expected to

manufacture something out of nothing. Everyone received something.

And it's ridiculously generous! Jesus is almost being silly here. Partly,

again, to get our attention, and partly to challenge our assumptions about

what we believe.

Remember, one talent is worth about 15 years' wages for the common

laborer. So the 5 talent guy got 75 years wages worth of his master's property.

Jesus' hearers would've giggled at how funny this is. But, Jesus has gotten their

attention, right?, and is using hyperbole, again, to make a point: God is generous

with what is entrusted to us. What might *seem* a little to us is not a little.

I like to think that the other reason Jesus uses this ridiculously generous

amount in the story, is because he knows that we tend to think too little about

ourselves and what our resources are, and what we have to offer. And Jesus

doesn't want us to think small about ourselves and what he's entrusted to us. He

doesn't want *churches* to think too small about themselves and their resources

and what they have to offer. He wants us all to see how graced we are. That

even something that appears like only a little—a little bit of skill, a little bit of

energy, a little bit of time, a little bit of money or other asset—is significant from God’s perspective. Think of the story of the widow’s mite, who simply offered some spare change. Jesus saw her small gift as huge and significant.

So, no one can say, “I have nothing to offer.” The question is not, “*Do I have something to offer?*” but “*What has God given me to offer?*”

Now, some of us may be unsure of our resources, some of us may not know how to put them to use and where; some of us may be afraid; and some may just be plain reluctant. If we find ourselves in one of these places, we can ask for God’s guidance and wisdom to help us through those. And God will be patient with us, and give wisdom, as always. *Not* like the business guy in the parable.

2. Talents were given to each, “according to their ability.” According to their ability. I appreciate that Jesus recognizes and affirms that everyone is different in terms of skill and ability, temperament and personality, time and treasure. And therefore, the results—the fruit—will be different.

This is an encouragement to us because it means that we do the best we can with what we have, at any given time. We do the best we can with what we have, at any given time. And, we won’t be compared to others. What matters is faithfulness to *our own* abilities and resources. God doesn’t compare us to others. That’s what *we* often do. And I’ve heard churches do that too... “We’re not like that

church up the street...” Good! You’re not expected to be. They’re doing what they do, according to their resources, and we’re doing what we do, based on our resources. And it’s all good.

Notice that the master says, “Well done, good and *faithful* servant.” He doesn’t say, “Well done, good and *spectacular* servant” or “well done, good and *better than that guy* servant.” He calls them *faithful* servants.

Faithfulness is doing the best I can with what has been entrusted to me—and to us—at any given time. Not being afraid, thinking that I have to be perfect, that I must never fail, or I/we have to produce great results. God never expects perfection, or spectacular results. Our calling is to be faithful with what has been entrusted to us, according to our abilities.

Which leads to the third and final observation from the parable, along with the first reading from Mark 6.

3. Risk-taking and adventure are not only encouraged, they are part of our calling. Risk-taking and adventure are part of our calling.

We could say that the risk and adventure begin when Jesus first says, “Follow me,” and people follow. Peter and his brother drop their nets and follow, which means they leave their jobs. Same with Matthew who gets up from his tax

collector's booth to follow, when Jesus issues the invitation. They, and many others, took a risk just to respond to the call to follow.

For us, to piggyback on what we talked about last week, it's basically the choice to become willing to take steps toward God, or we could say *with Jesus*, in all circumstances, as we learn to trust God more. Or at least be willing to become willing to follow. To become willing to take steps toward God, or *with Jesus*, in all circumstances, as we learn to trust God more.

And from there, we affirm that we have something to offer in service. That's one of the points of the parable: everyone is given something.

And that's the point in Jesus sending out his disciples on their little mission excursion: to affirm that they had something to offer. Although they discovered it, not by receiving something first and then going, but by turning out their pockets, leaving things behind, and discovering that they had something to offer *while they were serving*. We might say that they *received as they gave*.

This reminds me of some of the kids and adults who travelled with us from Anchorage to Mexico each year. Some of them didn't know what they had to offer or what they could do, but we told them to come along anyway—take the risk, have an adventure. And while we were there, in the process of, say, leading

activities or telling stories with children, or making crafts and doing Bible study with women in the village, or participating in a building project, or finding themselves naturally consoling a teammate who was struggling in some way, they discovered that they had something to offer.

So, affirming what we have to offer can happen either way: we can sit down and take an inventory of what we have been given, or, we go and do and make the discovery along the way. Either way, it's important that everyone knows they have something to offer.

Churches can do this too. To take inventory of their resources: human resources, connectional resources, financial resources, physical resources like property and facility and what's inside the facility, and so forth. Or, sometimes churches just try things and then see what is revealed to them.

The idea here is to not just play it safe all the time.

I'd like to point out that it's in our congregational DNA here at Maplewood to do these kinds of things! For example, when we hosted the Friday night dinners here, before Covid. We served the dinner once a month and other groups served on other Friday nights, but we took the risk of having homeless and working poor

in and around our facility. Same with the cold weather shelter that used to be here years ago. And our One Parish One Prisoner program.

So, it's in our congregational DNA and it bodes well for us as we consider what future risks and adventures we may embark upon.

Whatever form the risk takes, or who it's with, or what resources are involved, an essential element to taking risks and having an adventuresome spirit is overcoming fear. To go beyond what is safe, predictable, comfortable, certain, and what doesn't make us afraid!

This is the point of the parable, in part: we don't have to be afraid. If I were this guy in the parable who had this harsh and demanding boss, I'd be afraid too! But because God/Jesus isn't like that, we don't have to be afraid. This is the point, in part, of Jesus sending out his disciples from time to time. You don't have to be afraid. And I like it that Jesus is realistic that people may not respond favorably to them. In other words, this may feel and look like failure sometimes (even though it isn't). And if that happens, he says, move on. Keep going. You don't have to fuss over that situation, or over those people.

There isn't an expectation to go from one resounding success to another. Only to do the best we can with what we have at any given time.

New song: Let Your Heart Be Broken