

Pentecost 22 – Proper 28A  
The Reverend Melissa Hollerith  
Christ Church, Georgetown  
November 15, 2020

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Michelangelo once said, “The great danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high, and we miss it, but that our aim is too low, and we reach it.” We are too afraid to risk and as a result we do not live up to our potential.

In our gospel for today Jesus tells a parable about three servants who are given immense amounts of wealth to manage. Two of the servants take risk, they shoot high, they earn their master a profit for which they are rewarded. One takes no risk at all, he literally buries his talent, his aim is too low, and while he protects the asset, he makes no use of it. As a result, his master punishes him. It is a great story, and like all of Jesus’ parables, it makes us slightly uncomfortable. What did Jesus mean by it? What was so wrong with the behavior of the third servant? He may not have made a profit, but he didn’t lose anything either. He may have only played it safe, but at least he didn’t squander what was entrusted to him. What does Jesus want us to get out of this parable?

In the story a wealthy man goes on a journey, but before he leaves, he gives his three slaves control over all his wealth. In total he trusts them with eight talents. Now a talent was an ancient unit of measure that was equivalent to the weight of a large amphora (two handled Roman jug) filled with water – about 130 pounds. Interestingly, our understanding in English of the word “talent” as gifts and skills given to us from God comes directly from this parable. Although the parable doesn’t say it specifically, if the master passed out talents of gold then each talent would be worth more than 3.5 million dollars on today’s market. In Jesus’ day, a talent was equivalent to what a workingman made in 20 years. In any case, Jesus wants us to know that this wealthy man entrusted his slaves with vast amounts of wealth. Three slaves who owned nothing and were themselves literally owned by their master were told to take care of more wealth than they could ever imagine. The master didn’t even give them any instructions, he just left them in charge and went away. The first two slaves took what their master left them and

doubled it. The third slave buried his talent because he feared what his master would do if he squandered it. When the master returned home, he praised the two slaves who doubled his money and punished the third slave for doing nothing because he was too afraid. He was too afraid to take a risk; he was too afraid to make use of the talent he had been given.

In 1915, the great baseball player Ty Cobb set the record for stolen bases in a single season with 96. (A record he would hold for 47 years until Maury Wills broke it in 1962.) In 1922, Max Carey of the Pittsburgh Pirates became second best with 51 stolen bases. Does this mean that Cobb was almost twice as good as Carey, his closest rival? Look at the facts: Cobb made 134 attempts, Carey, 53. Ty Cobb failed 38 times; Carey only failed twice. Cobb succeeded 96 times, Carey only 51 times. Carey's average was much better than Cobb's. Cobb tried 81 more times than Carey. But here is the key: his 81 additional tries produced 44 more stolen bases. Cobb risked failure 81 more times in one season than his closest rival and Cobb goes down in history as the greatest base runner of all time.<sup>1</sup> Why? Because he tried. He wasn't afraid to risk.

What is Jesus trying to tell us in our lesson for today? Well for one thing, he wants us to understand that as God's servants who are born into this world with nothing and leave this world with nothing, everything we have we have been given by God who expects us to put it to good use. It isn't enough just to protect what we have; we have to invest in life, we have to try and use what we have been given in order to make this world a better place. Prudence and the desire for security are a necessary part of life, but they are not the prevailing values in the Kingdom of God. We may fail, but it is better to have used our talents and failed than it is to have played it safe and buried them in the ground.

In his book, *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis tells the fictional tale of a devil who briefs his demon nephew, Wormwood, through a series of letters, on the subtleties and techniques of tempting people, of drawing them away from God. In his correspondence, the devil says that the objective is not to make people wicked but to make them indifferent. He cautions Wormwood that he must keep the Patient comfortable at all costs. If he should start thinking about anything of importance, encourage him to think about his luncheon plans and not to worry so much because it could cause indigestion. And then the devil gives this instruction to his

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from a sermon by David E. Leininger

nephew: "I, the devil, will always see to it that there are bad people. Your job, my dear Wormwood, is to provide me with people who do not care."<sup>2</sup>

Not caring – perhaps this is the greatest sin. Whether it is because we are afraid of losing what we already have, or we believe we cannot make a difference, or because we think that nothing ever really changes for the better – it is our apathy, our indifference, the burying of our talents, that angers God the most.

Everything we have is a gift and those gifts are meant to be used in ways that reveal the love of God in the world. When we are fearfully indifferent to our neighbor or our community then we are failing God. It's all about risk - the risk to care, the risk to put ourselves in God's service even though we might fail, because to try and fail is always better than to not try at all. In fact, the major themes of the Christian faith – caring, giving, witnessing, trusting, loving, hoping – cannot be understood without risk. They cannot be lived out without risk.<sup>3</sup> As one preacher put it, "It is risk-taking, entrepreneurial trust in God, that causes tiny, mustard seed faith to grow into the 'largest of shrubs' for the sake of the Kingdom."<sup>4</sup>

This means the Master has called us all to risk loving even though we might not be loved back; to risk caring even though we may never be appreciated or live to see the difference made by our efforts; to risk witnessing to the power and presence of Christ in the world even though we may be rebuffed or scoffed at; to risk giving even when we are afraid that we do not have enough for ourselves; to risk trusting that through Christ all things are possible; and to risk hoping even when our world seems beyond hope. This is why Jesus said, "Do not be afraid," because fear makes us play it safe, fear causes us to hold tight to the gifts God has given us, fear blocks the creative and redemptive work of the Spirit. Make no mistake about it, we are the three servants and God is our master. We have been given talents of unbelievable worth. We may have one, or two, or five, but our generous master has entrusted them to us. The question becomes – what are we going to do with them? Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Dan Vellinga, *What Would You Do?*

<sup>3</sup> Fred Craddock, *Service*

<sup>4</sup> H. King Oehmig