

What was the best gift you were ever given, something you didn't expect that caught you by delightful surprise? Was it something you got at Christmas, on a birthday, for an anniversary? Maybe you thought of people; spouse/partner, children, grandchildren, friends; the people who love you anyway! What did you do with the gifts that you were given? Did you put them on a shelf or use them?

The best gift you ever got, really, was the gift that is you; uniquely created with a mind and heart to use the gifts of time and talent that you have. You didn't create yourself but through the divine recklessness of God. You didn't deserve or earn the right to be you. You are simply, by God's design, you! How did you use the gifts you were given? How are you using them now?

Those are the questions that Jesus' words in our text raise. This parable is one of several through these last chapters in Matthew's gospel spoken before he is arrested, betrayed and crucified. The church uses these parables to paint a picture of the end times when, as we say each week in the Apostles' Creed, "God will come to judge the quick and the dead".

The story itself involves a wealthy landowner who entrusts three of his servants with a great deal of money. To one he gives 5 talents or about 75 years of wages for a day laborer, to the second 2 talents, and 1 to the third one. He gives no instructions on how to use the gift. Upon his return, he asks for an accounting. The first and second servants double the master's investments which pleases him. It is not the amount of money but the initiative of the servants that counts.

The third servant begins with an explanation. Fearing the master's wrath, he buries the money. He is not a bad man or a thief, just prudent and cautious; attributes that unfortunately do not impress the master. He loses the money and his job, cast out into the dark streets.

If we believe that God has created and has gifted us, then what are we to do with those gifts? In Jesus' parable God is pleased when, like those first two servants, we use our gifts. God is pleased when we invest ourselves passionately into things that matter; things that bring blessing to other people, things that are signs of God's love and mercy set loose in the world. God is pleased when we sense that we and our gifts are here to be used for God's purpose.

In truth, however, we more often identify with the third servant. Paralyzed by fear, we hold back afraid to risk using what we have. When we bury the gifts God has given us, we risk not caring, not loving, not rejoicing, and not investing ourselves in things that benefit other people. At that point, we are existing, not living, marking time until our time is up. A plumber working on an old house this week found \$20,000 wrapped in aluminum foil taped to a rafter; hidden by the older person who had lived there. She played it safe but it did no one any good.

We would like not to be like that person but we live in fearful times. When so many around us have lost their jobs, homes and pensions, holding on to what we have seems the wise course. The "Occupy" movement by the "99%" reminds us of how uncertain life can be. If we use what we have we might lose it or be taken advantage of. Better to keep silent, keeping things to ourselves.

In truth, however, life was never meant to be safe. When we risk using who and what we are, there is the possibility we may be taken advantage of, but risking is what it means to be a human being. Think of the people who have invented things that changed how we live or think because they were willing to risk. Steve Jobs, CEO of Apple, said "...all expectations, pride and fear of failure fall away in the face of death. Remembering that you will die avoids thinking you have something to lose. There is no reason not to follow your heart."

Christians have a stronger motivation in remembering how Jesus risked everything for us. He left the rural security of Galilee and came to the city of Jerusalem which was controlled by all of his enemies. He risked speaking the truth and offering compassion to anyone around him which led him to the cross. He did this for us so that

we might have the courage that comes from knowing the love that God holds for you. Knowing this empowers us to use who and what we are for the sake of incarnating that love in the world around us.

We are each incredibly gifted even if we do not see ourselves that way. God has entrusted us with skills and time so that we might present the face of a loving God to a hurting and searching world. How are you investing your gifts? This parable leaves each of us to answer that question for ourselves. God's reckless love for us in Christ empowers, enlightens and enables us to risk.

+ Deo gracia +