

God's Invitation to Bless: Risky Business
Psalm 139:1-12 (NRSV); Matthew 25:14-30
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Psalm 139:1-12

¹ O LORD, you have searched me and known me.

² You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.

³ You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.

⁴ Even before a word is on my tongue,
O LORD, you know it completely.

⁵ You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.

⁶ Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.

⁷ Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?

⁸ If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

⁹ If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

¹⁰ even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.

¹¹ If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night,"

¹² even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

Matthew 25:14-30 (NRSV)

¹⁴“For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; ¹⁵ to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. ¹⁶ The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. ¹⁷ In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. 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. ¹⁹ After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them.

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.’ 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.’ 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.’ 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.’

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

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? 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.

²⁸ So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. 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. ³⁰ As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

Sermon

No risk, no reward.

That’s something that Larry Walters figured out back in the summer of 1982. Walters tied forty-two weather balloons to a lawn chair in southern California, and lifted off, way before the scene in the Pixar movie, “Up.” He quickly reached 16,000 feet—to give you some context, when I went skydiving I jumped out at 13,000 feet!...Pilots radioed air-traffic controllers saying that they had seen “some guy in a lawn chair floating in the sky.” Luckily he had brought along his pellet gun, so as he kept rising, he started shooting a few balloons. He ended up landing seven miles away, about 45 minutes later. True story! His reward for all this risk, besides getting mentioned in a sermon almost 40 years later, was spots on the Letterman and Tonight Shows, and a print Timex ad.

Larry Walters knew that if you don’t take risks, you won’t get any rewards.

That’s what the slaves in our parable this morning come to realize, too. It’s usually called the “parable of the talents,” but I think “Risky Business” might capture it better. Jesus tells the story of a rich landowner who goes on a trip, but not before giving out some talents to three of his slaves. He gives one slave five talents, another two, and another one.

Even though “talents” today means a gift or ability, back in Jesus’ time it meant a sum of money. Turn to someone next to you and guess how much money five talents would be worth today.

Any guesses?

A talent was worth as much as 10,000 days of work. So in today's terms, at \$10.00/hour times 8 hours a day, times 10,000...one talent is worth \$800,000. So the five talent slave got \$4mm, the two talent slave \$1.6mm, and the one talent slave \$800,000.

While the landowner is gone the five- and two-talent slaves put their talent to work. The one-talent slave wants to be sure that he doesn't lose the master's investment, so he digs a hole and buries it. In other words, the five and the two talent slaves start tying balloons to their lawn chair, while the one-talent slave? Not so much.

When the master comes back, the five and two-talent slaves have doubled their money, and their master is delighted! "Well done, good and faithful servants!"

But when the master discovers that the one-talent slave buried the talent in the ground, he gets mad and banishes that slave away.

Commentator Richard Bauckham explains the master's attitude like this:

The master is furious with the third slave because for a businessman, the whole point of money is to be used and risked and circulated in order to make more money. Money merely hoarded might just as well be thrown away.

In the same way, what God has given us—our selves, our lives, our faith, our abilities, our gifts, our possessions—is given in order to be risked and put into circulation. Our lives are to be expended in God's service, becoming thereby the source of further blessings for others and for ourselves.

Like the first two slaves in the parable, we remember that if we want to take God up on his invitation to bless others, we have to know the motto: no risk,

no reward. Putting \$4mm into circulation is risky business, but as the third slave found out, it was even riskier to dig a hole and not try any risk at all. As that same commentator put it, the moral of the story seems to be, “You can take a risk or not, but if you don’t, you are bound to lose.” God wants us to take risks as we serve him.

No risk, no reward.

Of course, God knew that first.

God risks so much to be in relationship with us. God recklessly pursues us. God runs out to meet us. God shepherds us. God forgives us. God loves us.

As our Psalm describes, God is on the move, always after us, always with us. No matter where we go—to the highest mountain or the deepest valley, to the farthest limits of the sea, to the lightest light, and the darkest dark, God is with us.

That is great for us, but it’s risky for God. The Psalmist says that God knows our every thought, and every word we speak even before it comes off our tongues.

I know every thought I have is not one that brings pleasure to God. There are lots of thoughts I think and words I speak that must disappoint God, must even hurt God. And God knows every one of them—the good and the bad.

And yet God keeps coming after us. It’s risky, and it’s reckless, because we reject him. It’s risky, because we hurt him. It’s risky, because even unconditional love can be unrequited.

It’s risky, but that risk pays off with the joy that comes to God when we embrace Jesus and join his mission to the world. Big risk; big reward!

So like God, we take risks to get a big reward. We put our gifts into circulation, working to bless others, because Jesus teaches us that if we don’t take a risk, we are bound to lose.

It's not just we as individuals who need to take risks. Churches do too. Joan Grey, a former moderator of the Presbyterian Church (USA), puts it this way:

Many churches wither and die because their leaders are afraid of failing. Like the third servant in the parable, they refuse to take the risks necessary to do the master's will...Rather than risk losing what God has given to the church, they turn into guardians of a building, a balanced budget, a tradition, or an endowment.

That's one of the reasons why I'm so excited about the Great Room. Whoever heard of a church thinking, "Hey you know that renovation plan that's been around for 30 or 40 years that we've never done? Let's do it now, while we don't have a permanent pastor. Oh and let's do it with all lay leadership. And let's start it on January 2, and tell everyone it's going to be done by Easter. And let's show everyone a big picture of it beforehand even though we're not positive that's the way it's going to look."

That's way too big of a risk! Why would a church do that?

Because the church has been practicing all year long for rummage without knowing what the weather will be like at the big sale. Because the church is like the first and second slaves. Because the church wants to hear "well done good and faithful servants." Because the church knows a better title for this parable is "the parable of risky business."

Of course, we don't know yet exactly what the reward will be. It will depend a lot on how we take advantage of the space to bless others. If the Great Room is a place where we can connect with new friends in a great way...if we remember that the Great Room is not our own clubhouse but an asset for all of Lake Forest and Lake Bluff...if we stretch our imaginations and think about

new ministries that can happen in and through that space, then the risk will pay off with an amazing reward.

There's an internet meme that I saw last week that seems to sum it all up. Maybe some of you have seen "Coffee with Jesus"—you can follow it on Facebook. The posts are always cartoons with four panels. There's always a panel of a person saying something to Jesus, then one of Jesus responding, then one with the person responding back, then the last frame is always some zinger from Jesus that shows that the person has been misunderstanding the Gospel.

Always, until the one I saw this past week.

Column 1 showed a guy saying,

I've been blessed with many gifts, Lord. Thank you!

Jesus replies,

I gave you talents, James, and you honed them, nurtured them, and put them to good use. So thank you, too.

James says back,

I'm honored that I've pleased you Jesus.

Jesus says,

You gave me an excellent return on investment, James. Proud of you, man.

Here's hoping the risks we take for the Gospel are big enough that Jesus tells us he's proud of us, too.