

Risking for God

1 Peter 4:7-11, Matthew 25:14-30

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Twenty-seventh Sunday after Pentecost

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So, to be honest, that parable we just heard
is one of those stories in the Bible that just plain troubles me.
There are a number of passages like this one in our good book,
where I find myself scratching my head,
sometimes even recoiling in spirit,
and wondering, really?
I mean, come on,
slaves and masters, reward for capitalist enterprise, punishment for being prudent, and the
weeping and gnashing of teeth.
What on earth are we supposed to make of this?

There are a lot of problems with stories like this one – Jesus told a number of them –
where they were purposely spoken and written not as literal truth,
but as allegory, as symbolic of some larger lesson in the world.
So it was in the hands of the audience to figure out just what it meant.

Over the years, interpreters have had a field day with this one.
For some it's a lesson about how we view God – is God mean and harsh?
For others, it's a lesson about not squandering our gifts.
For still others, it's a lesson in stewardship – the more we give the more we get.

There's really no one right or wrong way to interpret this story,
and so in some attempt to be faithful,
today I'm following the trail that most speaks to me,
a trail that leads me, at least this morning,
to talk about fear and risk in the life of faith.

Now the subject of fear has been on my mind of late,
particularly because of a recent experience I had.

It was about a month ago
when the wife of one of our nation's Presidential candidates came to the Twin Cities.
A member of our congregation asked me if I wanted to go, so I jumped on the chance.

It was fabulous event. The speaker was articulate, motivating, smart, relevant, and she spoke eloquently
and elaborately on a variety of topics.

She talked at length about health care.

She talked at length about education.

And as she spoke I could feel my heart burning within me,
burning with deep passion for justice and truth,
burning with the sense that what she was saying
wasn't about a particular party issue,
as it was about a moral imperative

to stand up for basic human rights.

The crowd roared as she finished speaking, and I did too. And then I said goodbye to my hosts and headed toward the door, fired up with all that I had heard.

And that's when a reporter stopped me.
He was from the Pioneer Press and asked if he could ask me a few questions.

I said okay, so he asked me what I thought of the speaker. "She was great," I said.
How so, he asked? "She was dynamic," I said. "She was really motivating,"

As I responded to each question, I found myself being extremely cautious. I thought, what am I doing?
Two seconds ago, I was so fired up, and now I can't say anything at all? I thought, I should tell this guy I
am a minister. I should tell him that as a minister and as a person of faith
these are not political issues we're talking about but basic justice issues,
and that it's a moral outrage that we don't have better health care and education for people.

And yet in that same moment, fear gripped me.
I began to think, what if my name goes into print?
What if I get in trouble for saying this?
What if someone from my church picks up this paper and is offended in some way?
What if I incriminate myself, First Church, or the UCC?

And so it was one of those times in life,
times that seem to find me now and again,
when I have a choice to let loose the power that is in me,
that flows through me,
the power for love, for justice, for peace,
the power to stand up for something
the power to do some good
to share my gifts, my insights, my gospel truth.

And yet on this day, when push came to shove,
out of reasons of fear, and safety, and security,
I chose to keep my mouth shut.

I gave only the most benign comments,
so that I slunk out of that arena,
feeling disappointed in myself,
and wondering,
What if I just missed a huge opportunity to make a difference?
Why did I let fear have such a big hold on me?

Those questions that rose up for me that day
reared their heads again as I read our story from Matthew from this morning,
For even with all its oddities and absurdities,
I can't dismiss this parable.
There is something in it that disturbs me,
that scares me,
that indicts me.

For at times, I am that third slave.
The one who plays it safe.

Better to do nothing, than to risk and lose something.
Better to be prudent, than to invest in something beyond my control.

My guess is that those hearers of Matthew's gospel may have struggled with the same questions.
Jesus, their master, was dead—
and as his followers in the early church, now they were waiting for him to make good on all his promises to come back.

Perhaps as they heard the story, they found themselves in a similar position as those slaves, wondering what to do in the meantime,
especially now that they had been entrusted with tremendous gifts from God—
gifts of the gospel message,
gifts of community spirit,
gifts of God's vision of justice and peace,
gifts of good works they had been doing, like caring for the poor.
What were they to do with these gifts until Jesus returned?

Perhaps as they heard this parable, what they gleaned was that it's not simply the slave's actions that were being condemned, but his attitude—
his unwillingness, his passivity, and his fear
of letting God's power, love, and treasure move in him and through him.
Here this slave had been entrusted by the master with this great fortune,
but he had failed to trust the master.
Heaven forbid he should risk and fail, for fear of what the master might do.

Maybe that early church was also scared of trying and failing.
Maybe they, too, were tempted by passive waiting,
for it would have been so much easier to sit in their enclaves,
to talk only amongst themselves,
to forget about the poor,
to keep the church as the status quo.

But what if, in this story, what they heard was God calling them to active participation in the life of faith?
To being a people not afraid,
so that they would pound those Palestinian streets telling people about God's love,
so that they would care for the poor, regardless of what others might think,
so that they would become peacemakers in their own community?
What if they could risk their own necks, their own reputations, their own security,
because rather than fearing God, they could trust God,
and rather than sheltering the gifts entrusted to them,
they could share those gifts?

What if love, not fear, could be their motivator?
What if active engagement, rather than passive resignation, could be their mode of operation?

When I think of the story this way, perhaps it's a lesson that's not so divergent from where I am now,
where we are now,
for I know there are times when I, maybe when all of us,
play it a little too safe,
opting for prudence instead of passion,
choosing restraint instead of risk.

Such prudence and restraint are what made me tongue-tied with that reporter a few weeks back. And I still kick myself and wonder what might have happened if I hadn't been so afraid to speak my voice.

What truth might I have spoken?
What lives might my words have touched?
What faith might my voice have nurtured?
What power of God could have flowed through me?

For me, part of the life of faith,
part of this ongoing journey,
is learning how to trust in the One who has entrusted me.
It's being reminded again and again,
that if I'm going to be a vessel of God's power and love and truth,
then I need to get myself and my fear out of the way.

It seems that God not only invites it, but demands it.
For when we listen only to fear and fail to risk at all,
then we miss the opportunity, like that third slave, to enter into God's joy,
not in a salvific way, but we miss being co-participants
in God's justice, in God's vision and work for what the world can be.

What would it look like if I really let God's love, God's power, God's message flow through me?

What if, instead of clogging up the communal arteries with my own fear and doubt, that love and power of God could just circulate through me and get on to the next person?

What if all of us could be uninhibited in our faith, in our speaking and living for God?

What if we let love and trust be our motivation, and let fear take a backseat?

Perhaps part of what it means to be faithful,
is to be people who are willing to take risks,
people who are willing to try

Like those slaves in the story, like those early church leaders from Matthew's day,
each of us has been entrusted with many and mighty gifts.

The question now is what will we do with them?

Will we listen to the fear and bury them?

Or will we trust in the One who has entrusted us
and become risk-takers for God?

Amen.

