

A family had a tradition that whenever any of the children did something wrong they had to go outside and cut their own switch. These were primitive old days when punishment was usually corporal. Anyway, young Brad had done something wrong and he was sent out to find a small branch that would serve as the means of his punishment. He finally returned with a small handful of rocks. With his lower lip quivering he said, "Daddy, I couldn't find a switch. How about if you just stone me?"

Another Sunday, another parable. And as so often is the case, it's about the kingdom of heaven – "it's like a man who was leaving on a journey who called in his servants and handed over his possessions to them..." Now a talent was a gigantic pile of money – in a single coin. I read in one commentary that it was worth almost \$750,000 in today's dollars – and in another that it was worth over 5 MILLION of today's dollars. Either way, it's a lot of money. So even the guy with only one talent was given about ¾ million dollars. And then the rich man just flies off to his villa in St. Thomas! Just checking if you're paying attention! Maybe on the Sea of Galilee then. He gives them no guidance on investment – just heads out of town. At this point in the story, this is a parable of the – take your pick -- unbelievably generous – or risk-taking, or reckless – person.

And then there's the time of judgment when the man returns. Obviously, the man is jubilant with the doubling work of the first 2 servants – and over-the-top angry at the servant who buried the talent. This man had treated the valuable coin with great respect and care. He had buried it. "Here, Master, here is your money, all safe and sound, just as it was given to me. Tell me what a good person I am for not risking the loss of your valuable money."

Rick Lisher, in his commentary on this parable, wonders how things would have been if the first two had lost all the money that they had been given. "Well, Master, we have good news and bad news. The good news is we boldly took what you gave us and invested it. The bad news is we invested it in what turned out to be a Ponzi scheme. Which means we're bankrupt, flat broke. There is nothing left. It is all gone."

Would the master have gone ballistic because of the loss? I think if that had happened, if they had lost everything, I believe that this Master, this strange master who had risked everything that he had on these servants, I believe this master would have said, "Well done, good and faithful servants. Enter into the joy of your master."

Lischer says that the point of the story is not results, but risks. The master is not only generous in bestowing his property on his servants, he is also someone who seems to relish risk. He is a risk taker himself and seems to adore that in those who are in his employ. The servants are praised or condemned on the basis of the risk they have taken or the risk they have avoided.

Parables are close cousins of jokes. As we know, jokes trade on the humor of the absurd, of exaggerated situations and above all, in surprise, unexpected endings. Which reminds us that the kingdom of heaven is a lot different than we so often imagine it to be. (adapted from Willimon, PULPIT RESOURCE, Oct-Dec 2023, p. 24-25)

OK, second, so what? What are we supposed to do with this odd parable? Well, all of us have some ability, some talent, some gift. And we are expected to use it, regardless of the risk. No one who reads or hears this parable gets off easy. So given our dilemma, here are 3 take-aways as I see it, in three words.

GENEROSITY is surely a key to understanding this rich, powerful master. He gives his servants a ton of money, and simply walks away. The amount shows how generous he was.

This man also has absolute CONFIDENCE that leaving these huge chunks of his wealth is a wise, prudent decision. His confidence is so great in the abilities of his servants, that he 'goes away' and no doubt sleeps soundly every night until he returns. Like generosity, the master's personality is colored with broad strokes of confidence.

The man has great EXPECTATION. With two of his servants, he receives a 100% return on his money. The master's rage against the third servant who buried his one talent is only magnified because he expected the servant to invest his money, in order to receive some modest interest at market returns. When the servant given the one talent treasure digs it up in his back yard, he hands the money back to his master totally unaware of the judgment to follow. The kingdom of heaven, we are reminded is like this.

What are we supposed to do with these three words? GENEROSITY, CONFIDENCE, and EXPECTATION not only apply to the master of the parable. They also apply to the servants. The servants entrusted with 5 and 2 talents both saw life through the lens of generosity. They were freely given a huge sum of money to hold in trust until their master returned. Rather than seeing this treasure as their own, or worse, spending it on themselves, they generously invested the money in ventures that handsomely rewarded their master's trust. The GENEROSITY of their master matched the GENEROSITY of these 2 servants.

Not so this third, frightened servant. He is the classic 'glass-half-empty' guy who has convinced himself that generosity paves the road to poverty. He thinks that the more generous he is, the less he will have. He measures life on the scale of his own fear, choosing to bury smidgens of abundance in the ground of terror. Not only is he incapable of being a prudent investor, he is void of vision, blinded by uncertainty, and ensnared by a sense of scarcity.

In the same way, CONFIDENCE aptly describes the first 2 servants. They know who they are and who their master is. They rightly perceive their employer to be a shrewd and successful businessman who earned his wealth from taking risk and reaping the rewards of such ventures. CONFIDENCE is a winsome human trait when it is nourished by humility. Rather than placing his confidence in the ground, the servants who double their master's money believe that even if they are not wildly successful, they will be commended for their efforts.

EXPECTATION informs the perspectives of all 3 servants. The first 2 expect a good return on their investment, they expect their master to hold them accountable, and they expect to be praised for being resourceful. The third servant expects the sky to fall and his own fragile ego to melt should he displease his master in any way. He is not disappointed. We might say, "all hell breaks loose" when he digs up the talent and gives it back. When he confesses, "I was afraid," he could have gone ahead and tattooed the 3 words on his forehead. The governing expectation of his life is fear.

So what do we do with these 3 words, these 3 servants, and our own lives? Three MORE little points! Don't worry, you WILL NOT DIE! This homily is no longer than usual – just has a lot of threes!

First drink deeply from the fountain of generosity. No one ever loses at life by being a giver. Give of our praise, our influence, our enthusiasm, our approval, and yes, our financial resources. We should be known as followers of Christ by how open we make our hands, not by how closed we keep our heart. Know that the God we serve, who has entrusted to us the treasure of His grace and gifts – He longs for us to be generous, as He is generous. Infinitely more than we could ask for – or even imagine.

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Second, have CONFIDENCE in God's good investment in us. It does no good to look around and see the talents of others, weighing our varied abilities in the scale of popularity. God has given to all of us gifts, abilities, talents, opportunities that no one else has. God's good gifts come to us with God's CONFIDENCE that we will use them to God's greater glory. And in so doing, use them generously to love and bless others.

Finally, live with wide-eyed EXPECTATION. What would happen if we awoke each day expecting God to use us in some life-changing way to love other human beings? Why muddle our way through a week with little expectation that one day will be different than another? We need to tear out those old ways of thinking, and throw them into a waste basket. In their place, EXPECT God to make our life the treasure that it is – gifted, loving, hopeful, forgiving, generous.

Who knows but God what new and wonderful chapters could be written in the biography of our lives if we would choose to live a more GENEROUS, CONFIDENT, and EXPECTANT life? Talk about treasure! A life lived like that is a treasure indeed. And at the end we would find ourselves standing before our Master on the great day of audit, only to find Him smiling like a rainbow, as He does every time someone does with their abundance what He did with His! Let the Church say AMEN. (bulk of homily adapted from GRACEWORKS, 19 November 2023, p 25-26)