

Nov. 13, 2011

“Of Dolls, Risk and Donald Trump”

Matt. 25:14-30

I was trying to think of a suitable image to try to capture the idea of this parable. The best I could come up with is from a high school sociology class, in which the teacher gives two students a life-size doll, one that wets, screams and cries...just like a real baby. For one week, the two students are supposed to protect their precious charge, to treat it as if they were real parents. They are forced to weather the worst moments as they try to figure out whether the screaming baby is hungry or wet or has a tummy ache. No pressure. But the screaming won't stop. The baby is not to be left alone for one minute, even if it is just a doll. The hope is that teenagers will learn enough from the experience that: a) they will know what to do when the real thing comes along; b) they will think twice about any otherwise carefree activity that might make a real baby; and c) they will learn something about the value of life and of teamwork.

That's what I thought about when I studied this parable. By now you're probably wondering if the preacher is one light bulb short of a full chandelier. How on earth did he come up with that?

This parable, to put it bluntly, is about judgment. It is as if to ask—in these moments just before Jesus was about to be taken from them—how ought we act while Jesus is gone. What should we do with our lives? It's also as if to ask, “On the Day of Judgment what will your Maker ask you about your life? Will God ask how much money you made, how many rounds of golf you played, how much money you put into the offering plate, or were you a good person? I don't think so. I think God will ask, “What did you do with the gift I gave you to give away? Did you tell anyone I love them? Did you show anyone?”

Jesus talks about a journey a businessman takes. The man leaves his property in the care of his servants. What kind of property are we talking about? Three servants are given charge of eight talents. A *talent* was a unit of monetary exchange, the weight itself equal to more than 75 pounds. Some of my notes suggest that one talent was equal to 15 years of a laborer's wage. Let's do the math: If a laborer today made, say, \$40,000 a year, we're talking as if one talent today might be worth something like \$600,000. The man left eight talents—or \$4.8 million—in the hands of his servants. What I'm trying to say here is that the man was leaving a precious treasure with three people. They'd better be careful what they do with it! Does it not remind *you* of the two teenagers entrusted with a child...a precious treasure?

To one servant the investor left five talents, to another two talents and to a third he left one. He was gone for a long time. When he returned he called the servants together to see what Santa Claus had brought. The one entrusted with five talents

grew from it another five. The investor was elated, said, “You did well. I think I can trust you with more.” The second said, “Look, I’ve been able to grow your two talents into four.” The master said, “You did well. I think I can trust you with more.” The third said, “I know how demanding you can be. I didn’t want to fail here, so I buried your talent, and see, here it is.” The owner went bazoorkas. “You could at least have taken this talent to a bank and placed into a CD. It would have been better than nothing!” And in the words of the immortal Donald Trump, he said to the servant, “You’re fired!”

So what is Jesus trying to say here in this parable? I don’t know. But I’ll give it a stab. I think Jesus is painting a picture of *how people ought to be with something terribly precious that has been left in their care*. A talent was a treasure. It was huge! What did it symbolize for Jesus? Possibly one of two things: First, when you think of “talent” what comes to your mind? The word has come to mean in English some ability or gift that is unique to a person. It should never be wasted. Each of us has a God-given gift. Some of you can teach. Some of you can play the piano. Some of you can bake a great funeral pie. Some of you are good with children. Some of you have a head for numbers. Some of you are good with words. A talent is a gift! It is never to be squandered.

The man became angry at the servant...not because he was dishonest, or lied or cheated. He did none of that. He was angry because the servant did *nothing*. He played it safe. He didn’t risk anything. In short, he was afraid. One of the most common commands God gives in the Bible is “Do not be afraid.” Why does God have to say that? The opposite of faith is not doubt. The opposite of faith is fear. The Bible scholar Douglas Hare wrote in his Matthew commentary that those whom Jesus called “ye of little faith” were church people, so-called “believers.” Faith, he said, is not a possession. It’s an activity. “*It’s like a song that disappears when we stop singing. Those of little faith are warned that they must exercise their little faith or it will wither away like an unused muscle.*” It will disappear.

The other possible way of understanding what a *talent* was—for Jesus—was the *gospel* itself. The church’s chief purpose is to live out and share the gospel of Jesus Christ. The good news! It’s what we do! It is the most important treasure we have. It is like a smile, in that it is useless if we do not give it away. It is the most precious gift we possess.

So...what is the good news? The good news I have for you this morning is this: *In the shadow of the truth that we are more sinful than we can ever imagine...the Word of the Lord is that we are more loved than we ever dare hope*. How can anyone...bury that in the ground for safe keeping?!

The gospel is for many of us the most difficult thing to share. Why? I don’t know. Maybe we’re afraid. Maybe it’s dangerous. What if someone laughs at us? What if I don’t know the right words and I end up offending someone? What if someone

asks me a question I can't answer about Jesus? What if someone thinks I'm a religious fanatic? What if my words fall flat? The gospel always is a risk. It cost Jesus his very life. And the Word of the Lord uttered in complete and utter love is as precious a thing as we have. Fortunately, not all of us have to use our voices. Some of us can merely use our lives. Francis of Assissi used to say, "*Preach the gospel. When necessary, use words.*"

Here at this table, no words are needed. Actions speak louder than words. The bread reminds us that Jesus thought even you and I are worth dying for. It is the bread of heaven. Here, the cup also recalls that forgiveness and grace are never cheap. They cost God everything. What will they cost us?