

-You know, has it ever happened to you when you look at pictures of yourself from way back and you think, "Wow, I was wearing THAT? I had that haircut? I was wearing those glasses??" My mom was an avid "home video" taker and there are a lot of videos of me in early grade school walking around with these blue velcro shoes. I always cringe when I see myself wearing these shoes because they weren't even the style of 1990. In the age of Nike air and the first shoes with lights in the heels, I was wearing blue shoes with two velcro straps. The reason for this wasn't because I liked velcro really, but was because I didn't really learn how to tie a shoe properly until I was in 1st or 2nd grade. I vaguely remember even kids at the time calling me "velcro kid", but really the judgement is more ferocious nowadays from myself when I see these videos. Why did I not learn to tie my shoes earlier? What a weird kid I was. Maybe you can relate to your own "weirdness" when you were younger and in many ways be your harshest judge.

-This type of harsh "You did that???" kind of judgement is quite visible in especially this challenging parable story that Jesus tells most commonly known as the parable of the talents. Many of you might not be aware that in the Gospel of Matthew, there are actually TWO Sermon on the mounts. The more famous one is towards the beginning of the gospel in Chapter 5 which we read on All Saints Sunday, and then there is this parable which is part of Jesus' Sermon on the TEMPLE Mount almost at the very end. Similar to what the gospel of Luke does in one compressed "Sermon on the Plain" where Jesus lays out the "blessings" and the "woes", Matthew structures these two sermons to mirror each other in specific ways. No doubt about it, it feels like we are in the "woes" section with the "wailing and gnashing of teeth cherry on top".

-But here is the thing: is judgement the sole purpose of this story? Is Jesus' main point: "Well, in end times, you are gonna be judged. Watch out!" That doesn't really seem to make much sense with his other teachings. Could it be that we have gotten so fixated on the velcro shoes that we miss some larger points?

-Of course this parable has also traditionally been used for Stewardship Sundays which makes me cringe to be quite honest. I even remember growing up in my congregation in MN, the pastor at the time giving the kids quarters during the children's sermon. It must have been in relation to this story because I fuzzily remember the charge of this pastor being "see what you can do with this quarter in the name of Christ." We Lutherans don't normally fall into the Prosperity Gospel mode, but using this text for a stewardship drive can come dangerously close and be a little disturbing: If you are wealthy, have bank accounts, and give a tithe, you're in the clear. Even the little bit that God gave to the poor, they were not able to do anything. I don't think that this is the point of Jesus' message either. So if Jesus is not getting at the velcro shoes or the nice bank accounts, what is the point here?

-I would like to make the argument that this story really has nothing to do with the master, talents, first two slaves, or even the judgement statement at the very end. What this parable has to do with is almost entirely centered around the third servant.

-Let me say something about talents. A talent in ancient Israel is not a “valuable coin” per se like sometimes it’s translated, but a unit of measurement: namely weight. A Roman talent was equal to 32.3 kilograms or about 70 lbs. So our third servant received about 70 pounds worth of coin, or what most biblical historians believe is about 15-20 years (or a lifetime) of wages. So this gift is not just a nice piece of money, it’s a HUGE sum that this master is sharing with these servants. Some get hung up and say, well, the servant that got 10 talents vs. 5 talents vs. 1 is important. I don’t think so. Because you are literally comparing someone who has \$1 million dollars with \$10 million dollars with \$100 million dollars. It’s still a big sum. What I see as crucial is the third servant’s statement in verses 24-25: “Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground.” But here is the thing: what evidence do we have to know if this is actually true?

-We don’t know much about the master, but what we do know is this: the master is sharing incredible amounts from his estate with who? (the servants) In fact, after the first two servants come back, the master says: “enter into the joy of your master.” In other words: come and be on my level. (This is incredibly radical for the time) So the question becomes, I think, is this fear of the third servant actually based in reality? It seems like the fear of the third servant is misplaced.

-Perhaps instead of naming this “the parable of the talents”, we should instead name it “the parable of the fearful servant.” Because the problem with the third servant wasn’t that he didn’t “invest” or that he was wicked and only “got 1 talent”. The problem is that the third slave is motivated by fear. That fear paralyzed him from risk, from doing anything. Instead of risking and sharing the great and abundant gifts of God, he hid them away and buried them.

-As we go into this Thanksgiving week, this parable can challenge us to ask: what are the gifts that we have and how are we risking them to the full? Are we willing to risk it for the sake of God? If not, why not? It’s probably because of fear. So why is it that we are afraid?

-There is a Lutheran Film Associates documentary called *A Time for Burning* made in 1966 which follows a pastor in Omaha, Nebraska who is trying to get his white, upper class Lutheran congregation to have a couple exchange (couples having dinner with another) with another dominantly African American Lutheran church. It’s fascinating to hear the reluctance of this pastor’s church throughout the film: “we’re Lutheran, we don’t want to alienate people”, “we don’t think our church should get involved with such a polarizing issue. Let’s volunteer at the foodbank instead”, or my favorite one: “we don’t

even know if the (black church) wants to even get together with us. We need to really figure this out first before we put precious money and resources into something they might not even want to do." Fear is powerful and finds a way to be an excuse to bury our talent in the ground.

-I was having a conversation last year with a professor at the U of M who is actively trying to engage faith communities in the work of Climate Change. He said to me: "every single social movement in this country was either started or moved forward in a radical way by by faith communities on the ground risking and modeling a new way." "Without churches risking it," he said, " a real movement doesn't happen."

-What kinds of things are we willing to risk for God? How can our radical sharing of God's gifts move the needle for this community?

-Happy Thanksgiving. May we be able to celebrate and give thanks for the many radical blessings of God. But, let us not forget the next step: allowing these gifts (with some risk) to radically change others for the better. May God help us have the courage to keep our talents above ground. Amen.