

“Faithful stewards”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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*Matthew 25:14-30*

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

I don't know what's scarier: hearing the end of that story, or finding out that your pastor is going to preach about money. I suspect that, for some of us, a sermon about money isn't all that far off from the “outer darkness.” In fact, I may hear some weeping and gnashing of teeth right now.

If you feel uncomfortable discussing money, especially your money, in public, you may have an idea of how the disciples felt. Because, besides the kingdom of God and forgiveness, Jesus talked about money more than anything else. Nearly half of his parables involve money.

Thankfully for you, however, money isn't all we're going to be talking about today. I want to talk with you about something even more precious than money—your life, and how you spend it.

When Jesus tells the story we just read, he knows that he is near the end. He knows that in a few days he will be betrayed and crucified. He knows that the disciples are going to feel lost and afraid. They are going to be tempted to shutter themselves in a room and hide from the world. And so he tells them a series of stories about what it means to live in the in-between, in the time between his departure and his return, in the space between desire and satisfaction, between faith and knowledge, between hope and justice. He tells the story of a master going on a long journey, just as Jesus himself is about to go away. He tells the story of servants who must figure out for themselves what to do in their master's absence.

They are each given a gift. One servant is given five talents. Another is given two, and another is given one. A talent was worth more than 15 years wages as a laborer. It was a lot of money. And they have to discern what to do with this money.

In the same way, we each have been given a life. It is not ours. We did not make it. We did not earn it. It was just given to us, as the talents were given to the servants. In this life are many gifts: intellect, passion, skill, family, the world around us, and resources that, depending on how they are used, can make the world a better place or a worse place.

We, like the servants, face a choice. Do we keep the gift close, safe and protected, or do we put it at risk by sending it out into the world, on the chance that it will grow?

Some years ago, a Catholic priest in El Salvador wrestled with this very question. A fellow priest, and a dear friend by the name of Rutilo Grande, had just been killed—assassinated for speaking out on behalf of the poor. Up until this moment, Oscar Romero—many of you will recognize the name—had chosen to keep the gift close. He had lived a safe and pious life. He had studied in Rome and risen to the rank of bishop, eventually archbishop. He had achieved this

success, in part, because he preached God's support for the Salvadoran government. He refused to risk the protection of the church by questioning the status quo.

He buried the gift of his calling so deep within that he was able to ignore the violence and inequality all around him. At that time, about a dozen families owned nearly half of the country's land. While aristocrats, politicians, and church leaders lived in luxury, the majority of the Salvadoran people were barely surviving. Those priests who did dare to speak out were silenced, tortured, and sometimes killed.

In the conventional interpretation of Jesus' parable, Romero was like the third servant, who took his gift and hid it in the ground. It was a sensible thing for the servant to do. At least that way nothing would be lost. But when the master returned, he was furious and threw the servant into the outer darkness. Why? Because the servant was supposed to do something with the gift. Use it, grow it, share it. Not hoard it out of fear. But, like the other two servants, trust in the goodness of his master and take a risk.

We might relate. We hold onto our money, our time, our passions, afraid that if we share them, we might not have enough left for ourselves. We bury our gifts, afraid of the vulnerability that would come from handing them over to the world and to God.

But maybe this isn't just a story about sharing our talents. Newer readings of Jesus' parable point out that this master doesn't sound anything like the God announced by Jesus, the God who lifts up the poor and cuts down the powerful. In the Gospel of Luke, we hear that the master is hated for his violent oppression of the people.

Romero, in that case, was actually like the first two servants, who knew full well that their master was corrupt and cruel. But instead of taking a risk and naming this wrong, they fell in line. They kept their mouths shut. They imitated his exploitative practices, extracting even more wealth from the poor. It was only the third servant who risked it all and refused to participate in this unjust system. He called out his master's injustice to his face. And when he is thrown into the outer darkness—the same darkness that falls on the land when Jesus is crucified—maybe Jesus is there, waiting for him, waiting to gather unto himself all outcast prophets.

Again, we might relate. We stay silent when we should speak.

Regardless of which interpretation you accept, one thing is clear: we are not meant to play it safe. We are not meant to live fearful lives that produce nothing, change nothing, give nothing. We are meant to burn with the flame of the gospel. To take what we have, risk it all, and see what grows. To fling our money, our very lives, into the service of good, trusting that our master, Jesus Christ, will be there to invite us into his joy. We are meant, in the fashion of our Father, to become creators. Exuberant multipliers of goodness. Risk takers. Cross darers. Justice speakers.

This is what Oscar Romero heard, at the age of 60, as he looked upon his friend's bloodied, priestly robe. He knew that he couldn't play it safe anymore. He had to act. And so he began to speak out. In a weekly radio program that reached millions, he listed the names of people who had disappeared, been tortured, or murdered. In his sermons, he preached an end to violence,

corruption, and poverty. In his life, he took up residence with the poor and became the hero of his people, an internationally recognized champion of human rights.

I wish I could tell you that all went well. But a risk is a risk. And on March 24, 1980, a gunman stepped into the open doors of the church where Romero was about to offer Communion and shot him. Romero had just preached these words: “One must not love oneself so much as to avoid getting involved in the risks of life that history demands of us... Those who try to fend off the danger will lose their lives, while those who, out of love for Christ, give themselves to the service of others will live.”

Romero spoke of a life that could not be stopped by a bullet. Or by a cross. He spoke of a life that hadn't really begun until he finally stopped worrying about protecting it. He spoke of a life that, in risking everything, gave hope to millions and redeemed the church. He spoke of a life that planted the seeds of change. A life fervent with faith and action. A life that grew something so good, so beautiful, so right, that anyone, upon living it, wouldn't trade it for a thousand lifetimes.

What Romero realized before the end was that the choice was never between a shared life and a hoarded life; it was between life and never really living at all. For the only life worth living is the one that is shared, the one that grows and multiplies the goodness of God's gifts.

We each are called to be faithful stewards of our life, and all its gifts. We are called to return to our master more than even we thought possible. Not just money, but everything. Through this church, through our ministries, we are called to be growers of possibility. Who knows what will happen? We may, like the servants, live to see our gifts multiplied, or we may even, like Oscar Romero, inaugurate a revolution and remind the world why Christ died—and why he rose again.

**Amen.**