

Proper 28, Year A – Matthew 25
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All Saints' Episcopal Church
Teri Daily

German researchers investigated what characteristics seem to make people more likely to take risks. The conclusion they reached did not include specific Enneagram types or childhood experiences or personality traits. Instead, the researchers found that tall people are more likely to take risks than those of short stature, males more than females, and younger people more than older ones.¹ If this is true (and that's a big if given my tall husband's risk-aversion), then the first and second slaves in today's gospel reading may well have been young, male, and tall. They certainly seem more willing to take risks than the third one.

Jesus tells the story of a man who is going on a journey and so entrusts his property to three slaves. He gives one slave five talents, to another he gives two talents, and to a third he gives one talent. The first two slaves take the money entrusted to them and use it to make more money. When the Master returns, he says to each of those slaves: "Well done good and trustworthy slave. You have been trustworthy in a few things, so I will put you in charge of many things." The third slave, though, is paralyzed by fear. When the Master returns home, that slave tells him: "Master, I knew you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering seed where you did not scatter seed, and so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, take what is yours." "You wicked and lazy slave," cries the Master. And the slave is thrown into the outer darkness.

We usually like to try to figure out who all the characters in a parable represent, but parables don't always work that way. To assume that the Master represents God in this story would be to go against the God we see portrayed elsewhere in the gospels, the God we see in the life of Jesus – the God who embraces outcasts, heals the sick, searches for that one lost sheep, and forgives even while hanging on the cross. The Master in this parable is nothing like the God we see in Jesus. There is no one-to-one correspondence here.

But there *is* profound truth in this parable: When we are wracked with fear (like the third slave), we are unable to take the risks that being faithful to the gospel requires.

Jesus himself was willing to take risks. He could have stayed in Galilee where he healed, preached, and envisioned a new social order – all without arousing too much the ire of the Roman authorities. But just four chapters before today's reading, he rides triumphantly into Jerusalem on a donkey. He takes a big risk. Not the risk that he will be killed; that's not a surprise but a foregone conclusion. That's just what happens when someone challenges a brutal authoritarian regime. The real risk Jesus takes is that his faith is well-founded – that God

¹ "Tall People and Men Less Risk-Averse," UPI, https://www.upi.com/Business_News/2005/09/19/Tall-people-and-men-less-risk-averse/52451127164242/.

will be with him no matter what, and that on the other side of whatever happens will be the gift of new life.² He takes the risk that what he trusts in his heart will be true in reality.

The disciples will soon be called to also take the risks that being faithful to the gospel requires. In the very next chapter of Matthew, Judas betrays Jesus. The disciples will then watch as Jesus is arrested, tried, and executed. Three days later the tomb will be empty. Jesus will appear to the women on their way back from the tomb and then later to the disciples in Galilee. Jesus will commission them to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them all that Jesus commanded. Will they have the faith and courage to take risks, to lean into the calling entrusted to them, to lean into a new way of living? Or will they bury their calling in the ground out of fear?

And what about us? We find ourselves at this moment in a situation we never imagined. So much of what we have known is different now. Who knows what “church” will look like when we come back together? But it will be different. Can we be vulnerable and take the risks necessary to live the gospel in our own time and place?

I want to be clear that I am not talking here about risky behavior like not wearing masks, or not changing the way we gather and worship. Wearing masks and being physically distant are ways we are called in this moment to love our neighbor.

The risk I am talking about is the risk of doing things in a new way. Like Jesus, now as we come to the edge of what we know, can we trust that God will never leave us, that God will provide a way forward, and that God’s dream for the world will not be defeated? Can we grieve what has changed and what we have lost, and then pick up the gifts God has given us and move forward?

More than height or gender or age, I believe that two other factors are even more important – a faith that trusts in resurrection (that trusts that after any end is a new beginning) and the presence of a community surrounding us. With these two things, we can take the risks required to be faithful stewards of the love we ourselves have received and not bury it in the ground. We can trust that, even now, a new way of living can be born in us.

² Mark Beckwith, “Taking Risks for Faith,” *Diocese of Newark*, <https://dioceseofnewark.org/bishops-blog/taking-risks-faith>.