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Matthew 25:14-30

## PRESERVATIONISTS

The message of our parable today is rather straightforward. What will you do with what you have been given?

We find ourselves still in chapter 25 of Matthew where Jesus just keeps telling one parable after another. Stay tuned to next week, because he's still not done. In our parable for today, Jesus tells us about a very harsh master who planned to go away on a trip and entrusted three slaves with varying amounts of his money. When we hear the word "talent" we think of skills and abilities: whether a person is good at drawing or playing a musical instrument. But in the Ancient Near East a talent was a unit of money. So each of these slaves is entrusted with an amount of money. The first two go off and find ways to invest the money to make more money for their master. But the third slave was so afraid of what his master would do if he lost the money, that he took the one talent he had been given and dug a hole and buried it for safe-keeping. When the master returned, he praised the first two slaves for their shrewd way of making more from what they had been given. But this third slave, the one who buried his talent--well, you recall what happened to him? He was yelled at and then kicked out the door into what the story calls "outer darkness." Outer darkness was probably used to mean a place of judgment. At the very least, outer darkness was a condition of sorrow and loss and alienation. I think outer darkness is that place we find ourselves in when we have chosen to live life on our own terms rather than on God's terms.

However you define it, outer darkness seems a bit harsh for a guy whose only fault was burying his money. So, clearly, something else is going on in this parable than what appears on the surface.

You know, when we hear this parable about the third slave burying his talent, I bet you picture, as I did, the slave digging a small hole in the ground into which he tosses a single coin. But it turns out that a talent is equal to 15 years of a day laborer's salary. Fifteen years of salary! What we are talking about here isn't a measly little coin but a fortune! Imagine a great big heavy bag of money being dropped with a giant clunk into a great big hole--and then buried.

The slave buried a fortune! Which may give us a clue that this parable, even though it talks about money, isn't really about money. Let's look at *when* Jesus tells this parable to his followers: he is on the eve of his arrest and crucifixion. So clearly, with death staring him in the face, Jesus is not likely to be giving his disciples advice on how to invest their money. Other concerns were of far greater importance to Jesus. When Jesus tells this parable about the slave who buried a fortune, he is trying to tell us something. He was trying to tell that *we* are the fortune.

You are that fortune that God values. You and your life and all that you are, you are the fortune: the way you cry at sad commercials and get angry whenever you hear a story about cruelty to animals; your love of the outdoors and your care about the beautiful places of the earth; your love of baking and your gifts in putting together a budget or fixing a car engine; the way you are loyal to your friends and family and how you have a special ability to pick up on a person's unspoken emotions. You and your life and your gifts are the fortune that is of great worth to God. You are the fortune in which God has chosen to invest.

So what are you going to do with that fortune? Are you going to bury it? Preserve it? Keep it safe? Are we going to treat our lives like those people who cover their furniture with plastic so that it won't wear out? Throughout the Gospel of Matthew, it is made very clear over and over again that what we are given in life is never intended for our benefit alone. It is always to be used to serve others, help others, care for others, stand up for others, bring joy to others.

What will you do with what you have been given in life? What will you do with your ability to play a musical instrument or your special gifts in mathematics or foreign languages? What will you do with your anger when you hear a story about torture, or hunger, or gun violence, or the ecological crisis? What will you do with the compassion you have for other humans beings or for animals? What will you do with your education? What will you do with your power--and yes, every one of us here today has more power than we are willing to appreciate: power to vote, to raise our voices, to assemble, to write letters, to use our money. What will you do with what you have been given?

What is clear from this parable is that preservation is not faithful. Just preserving our lives, preserving our resources, preserving our energy, preserving our time, preserving our emotions is not faithful. We are expected by Jesus to take risks. We are expected to act with courage.

When we speak about having courage and taking risks, what comes to my mind is the image taken from years back during the protests in Tiananmen Square of a lone protester standing firm as a tank comes barreling toward them. That is certainly an image of courage and risk. But I think that few of us are likely to face such dire circumstances in our lives. But it always, always takes courage to walk the way of Jesus. It takes courage to love as Jesus teaches us. It takes courage to care about the undocumented immigrant, and about the person on death

row, and the neighbor next door who is rude. It takes courage to support unpopular causes. It takes courage to show grace to someone everyone else is vilifying. It takes courage to embrace real peace when everyone else supports armaments of some kind. And following the way of Jesus is a big risk. You risk not being loved back. You risk being hurt. You risk anger. You risk some measure of chaos. Loving enemies, praying for those who persecute, going the extra mile, all come with risks.

But what is the point of preserving our lives? Jesus states earlier in Matthew's gospel, "those who lose their life for my sake will find it." When he says "lose their life" Jesus means risk their lives, share their lives, use their lives, give their lives." We find our lives by risking our lives. When it comes down to it, you and I are given just two tasks in our lives: to love God and to love our neighbor. How you will carry out this task, based on your personality and abilities and gifts, will be different from how I will carry out this task. But Jesus beckons us to find the courage and to take the risks to use all we have and all we are to carry out this mission. Because preservation is not faithful.

But churches are skilled in the art of preservation. Churches are experts in preserving traditions, and worship styles, and buildings. Somewhere along the way, we have lost the message of taking risks for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

St. Mary's Episcopal Church in Los Angeles found itself in decline, like many mainline Christian churches. Faced with more space than they needed, they began to open their church to community organizations that needed space. This seemed like a way to share the fortune they had in their building and live out the mission to love God and to love neighbor. Their pastor Anna Olson writes that "At St. Mary's, we are becoming a center for community activity. Rooms that once stood empty are filled with music, dance, exercise, English classes, community

meetings." But, she reflects, among the joy of sharing their building, there sometimes occurs what Olson calls "trespasses": occasions when toes get stepped on. "People forget to check the schedule; use other people's tablecloths; neglect to take out the trash; spill things that are sticky; put up decorations that others find garish, using tape that damages the paint." Olson adds that "Trespasses have stemmed from everything from proper storage of kitchen supplies to the use of incense to personal hygiene, from what level of child rambunctiousness requires removal from church to how many sandwiches is too many on one plate at coffee hour." Olson concedes that, "There's no blood, no weaponry, but the offenses tap deeper anxieties and raise larger questions about what church is for, how best to take care of it, and whether there is space for all of us in it."

In reflecting upon these internal tensions within the church, Olson notes that "The easiest way to keep things nice in a church building is almost always limiting access. The fewer people who use the kitchen, the less likely we are to find a mess." That would be true for our personal lives as well. The easiest way to keep our lives nice, to keep them orderly, to keep them unscarred, unblemished, would be to limit our access to external forces. We could bury our lives, bury the fortune that God has invested in us. We could preserve our lives so they would not be messy or harmed or hurt. We have a choice. Olson concludes that "Toes will be stepped on." However, she adds, "A few bandaged toes may be a good sign that we are up to exactly what Jesus hoped we would be up to."

\*citation from: *Claiming Resurrection in the Dying Church*, Anna B. Olson