

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
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Proper 28 Year A
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Last week we called her Mary, the one who was scorned, the one who was shut out from the lavish wedding feast, the one punished because she didn't have her life all put together, or the one who didn't have the resources to purchase extra oil for her lamp (maybe because she had shared with others because they had none and she had extra), or maybe because life was particularly hard in that moment and she didn't really feel like celebrating and chose not to have all that she needed to walk through those heavy doors, because she didn't want to pretend to be happy or she didn't want to be judged by others. We know she didn't really miss out. As it turned out, there wasn't a celebration at the wedding feast anyway, because there was no bride, there was no union to rejoice in. But rather Mary showed up at another party in town that evening, where they anointed each other with tears of joy, for the bride and bridegroom were there together: Jesus and the followers who became the church, and there was a lavish meal which fed their souls, as well as their bodies.

This week, let's call the person who is scorned for his inability to "be it all" and "do it all" Mark, and let's put him into modern context.

Mark is the youngest of three sons, and considerably so. Sometimes when his parents talk with other adults about him, he listens to their snickers and hears the word "accident" mentioned. He doesn't know quite what that means, but he gets it that it's not so good. He loves his older brothers and has always looked up to them, but recently, now that he's in middle school, he feels some rather odd feelings emerging, some rather dark emotions, such as resentment or jealousy, and he spends his life confused, withdrawn, and most days finds himself wanting to crawl into a hole and disappear. Oh, his oldest brother, Jack, is amazing. He's gotten straight "A's" from the first grade through high school. He is in all the gifted classes and the Ivy League colleges are searching him out, and to top it off, the universities are offering him full academic scholarships, which really delights their parents, for money is tight. It sometimes feels to Mark that Jack is the favored son, but then there's the middle son, James, or Jimmy as his friends call him. He is so fun-loving, everyone seems attracted to him like a magnet and he has trouble deciding what to do on weekends, for the many choices offered him. Jimmy isn't gifted academically but he makes good grades and stays out of trouble - oh, and he's fantastic at sports. He's on the travel team for soccer, then basketball, then softball. His room is so full of trophies, Mark nearly trips on them any time he ventures into James' room. Half the trophies at the middle school have his name on them.

Mark sees the teachers' delight when he comes into their classroom on the first day of school, referring to him as Jack and Jimmy's brother, but the teacher's eyes lose their sparkle, once he starts handing in his homework or see him sit sullenly by himself during recess. He knows he's not good at anything and so do his teachers. He's tried for a while and made mostly B's and C's, but that hardly seemed worth the effort. Then finally, he just quit trying. He could never live up to his "gifted" oldest brother, so why even try? Now he makes C's and D's, with a few F's mixed in. He's not very good at sports either. He's tried just about everything: soccer, basketball, track, but he is just a klutz at everything. Compared to his brother out there, he looks like an old lady trying to play sports, so he just quit. Interestingly though he was pretty good at the clarinet, which is something neither of his brothers could play. But he found he didn't really like to practice. Sometimes he even wondered if he really hated to practice, or if he was just scared that he will

never be really good, even if he did practice. Or afraid that if he was really good at playing the clarinet, his parents wouldn't notice, and that would be worse than anything. It was easier to not even try. It was safer to not even try. The mantra his parents say to him each day is, "You're not living up to your potential." Mark responds, in his head, "Well, how would you know? You're too busy taking Jack off to colleges or sitting for hours on the bleachers in the steamy high school gym watching James. What do you even know about your stupid klutzy son?"

Mark found it safer not to try. Mark found it easier to put up with his parent's chastisement than to risk failing at something, or to risk being good at something, afraid his parents wouldn't even notice.

The familiar story we heard today in our gospel reading, the parable of the talents, can easily and not incorrectly be interpreted as admonition to lavishly use the gifts God has given us to multiply them so the Kingdom of God can come near to all people. But we've all heard that sermon before and although important, it can be fairly easy to dismiss or to be heard in a way that reinforces what we're already doing, without providing any challenge or place to stretch.

So, I'm going to offer you an alternative, because like last week, it's really important to remember the context of the parable we heard last week and this one – this is Holy Week. Jesus is preparing to die and has a few last moments to distinguish for the disciples what the Kingdom of Heaven looks like (the one fashioned after Jesus' teaching, healing, and gathering the discarded into community through his love) and the one which will be presented by false prophets, a fake Kingdom of Heaven. This is like parents dropping their children off at college and not being able to refrain from saying, "And you'll meet new friends, and they may think some things are right to do that you think are wrong, so don't follow them there. Trust what you know about how we've raised you. Stay steady in that truth of who you are and who we have been to you."

The challenging perspective in our parable today is when we see within it the fear of taking risk, for what does that say about what we believe about God? The third servant, like the third son, was afraid of the master (like the son of his parents), and chose not to risk either failing at something (investing the money and losing it, or in Mark's case showing his parents yet again he isn't good at anything) or risk being good at something (making a profit or being chosen for the middle school band) and not getting the recognition desired, that they both seemed to crave, so they could believe for a moment that they had value. For the servant, we may ask, "How would he know how much interest is enough? What would be enough? Could there be too much? Would his master think he was being greedy?" His fear of getting it wrong paralyzed him from doing anything at all, other than hiding the money in the ground. I imagine we can all remember times when fear paralyzed us as well.

Now you may have noticed that our parable presents two different images of the master, and if we imagine the master to be an allegory for God, we can connect one image of the master to the real God and the other image of the master to the fake or false prophecy of God. The first master, or God, we are introduced to is generous and trusting in his servants' ability to handle his entire treasure as he heads out on a trip. There is no need for specific instructions, for whatever they do, will be fine, for he trusts them to do their best.

The second image of the master is one who is harsh, arbitrary in expectations and demands and is to be feared, for he punishes displeasing results, even though he hadn't told the slaves what he expected to happen with the talents given to them. This sounds a bit like a capricious God, one

who changes his mind and expects you to keep up. My sense is this portrayal is the prophecy of the false God.

Since we potentially have two images of God to connect with, let's see what difference it makes to be in relationship with each one.

If we are in a relationship with a God who is generous and trusting, we most likely feel loved. And feeling loved, we can return that love and our deepest desire is to do what is best with what has been entrusted to us. It's a way of honoring the generosity bestowed upon us. Although we may feel a bit of fear at the magnitude of the responsibility to do what is pleasing in the eyes of this God, like we may feel the weightiness of the responsibility of caring for the earth that God has entrusted into our care, we often find this awe gives way to the trust we also feel from this God, which translates into an encouragement to dare to risk to do our best for the God who we know will take whatever we may offer, however scant or limited or broken, and will make good out of it. This generous and trusting God knows our hearts and sees the goodness and truth in us, even if we don't, and just as when a parent, or a spouse, or a friend loves us unconditionally, we are willing to risk a bit, to take a step forward in faith, to live into the mystery a bit, knowing that person or God will delight in our efforts and not condemn us with less than stellar results. We often call this grace, this state of being, which we can enter into because of the goodness and loving character of the God we believe in.

The other God in our parable, the one that shows what the Kingdom of Heaven is not like, is the angry and vengeful God who casts this servant off into isolation and horror. A natural response to this kind of person or God is one of paralyzing fear, walking on eggshells, working hard not to be noticed, for if I am not seen, then I cannot be punished or banished or abused. Being in relationship with this type of God or person would most likely cause us to shut down insight, creativity, and engagement with a Spirit that may take us in uncharted and risky waters.

Richard Rohr, in his book, *The Divine Dance*, says that we become like the God we believe in. I would turn that statement a bit to add, we become like the God we believe in or the one we need to believe in to justify our behavior. This means, if we believe in an angry and judgmental God, one who casts people out into darkness and gnashing of teeth, then we can justify our being that way too. If we believe God slams shut the door of the Kingdom of Heaven on people who are unprepared or don't try hard enough, then we too can slam that door on a good part of the people of the world and feel justified by it. But then we have to ask the question, "Is that what we really believe about God?" and if so, "Why?" "Why don't we believe in the reshaping, the reformation, the transformation that Jesus offered us on the cross, that spoke only of God's love for all humankind?" In this act of love, God didn't punish the ones who got it wrong or weren't prepared, but rather died so that they could live, and have life abundantly. And living abundantly means being willing to risk because God has given us all that we need, and more.

The other God presented in the parable, the generous, loving God, the one who gives his whole treasure away, the one which shows the character of the Kingdom of Heaven, follows along with Desmond Tutu's statement, "If it's about love, then it's about God. If it's not about love, then it's not about God." This is a God who gathers the scattered, draws near the injured, attracts the rejected, and draws them to the table. If we believe in this God, then we too will be one to gather the scattered, we too will sit with those at our community meals, because Jesus is already there with

them and we want to be where Jesus is, we too will visit in the prison, feed the hungry, and clothe the naked.

As we say in our collect on Friday mornings during Morning Prayer, “Jesus stretched out his arms on the hard wood of the cross so that everyone may come within his saving embrace.” Believing in a God who would do that for us, and thus calls us to do that for everyone else, can feel risky. And if it is risky, then perhaps it is of God, for it does seem to me that God is the greatest risk-taker of all. God trusts us, we fallible humans, with each other and with God’s creation, and built into that trust is always intention and invitation to redemption and transformed living. When we believe in a loving God who takes risks for us, who loves us into being, then I believe we too can become risk-takers for love. This is what this parable can teach us. Be risk-takers for love.

We often say fear is the opposite of faith, largely because each time the angels show up in scripture, they begin their conversation with “Do not be afraid” for fear can prevent us from seeing, hearing, and loving God. Do not be afraid, my friends. Above all else, God has entrusted you with your love of God and it is right and good to share that love boldly with others. We can’t get that wrong, for that always will be pleasing in God’s sight.
Amen.