

TEXT: Matthew 25:14-30

THEME: We are gifted

SUBJECT: Risks

TITLE: A Wise Heart

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Messiah Moravian

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We may be created equal, but we are not equally gifted. Some are given many talents; everyone has at least one talent. The good news is, no more is required of us than is given to us. The two talent servant is not expected to produce the profits of the five talent servant. What is expected of us is the faithful exercise of whatever gift or gifts we have been given.

Being differently gifted tempts us to compare ourselves with one another. If we compare ourselves with those who have more talents, we become envious and feel bad about ourselves. If we compare ourselves with those who have fewer talents, we become judgmental and feel superior.

As gifted as Thomas Merton was, he was reminded by his superiors that he was no St Augustine. Of course, I would hasten to add, his superiors were no Thomas Merton.

The poet Henry Van Dyke encourages us to use whatever talents we possess, for the woods would be a very silent place if no birds sang except the best. Whether we have one gift or many, each of us is expected to use our talent for the good of the community.

The parable tells us the fate of the five and two talent servants who use their gifts for the profit of the master. They are invited to enter into the joy of the kingdom and given even more responsibility. This is the treadmill of success: the more you accomplish the more you are given to do.

The parable tells us the fate of the one talent servant who is paralyzed by fear, buries his gift and returns it to the master unused. The master takes his gift and gives it to the five talent servant, calls the fearful servant worthless and has him thrown into outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The punishment for the crime of living cautiously, for playing it safe, certainly drives home the point of leaving it all on the court, but it also strikes me as harsh. It makes me wonder about the inner darkness of a master who so easily condemns the fearful to outer darkness.

A priest was asked what he learned from hearing confessions, was there a common pattern or problem. The priest responded, "God." Most people coming to confession have an image of God as a harsh tyrant, rather than as a loving and benevolent creator.

Let's be honest, if this parable were the only source for our image of God, we would have to conclude that God is a harsh tyrant. This wealthy master entrusts his property

to servants, goes on a Mediterranean cruise, returns tanned and rested and demands an accounting from those who worked while he played.

You either produce and are rewarded or you fail and are condemned. There is nothing benevolent about this master. Where is the grace in this parable? This is the god of hedge fund managers, not the God of Abraham and Sarah.

What this parable does not tell us is the fate of a servant, whether of one or five talents, who is not afraid, who risks everything and loses everything.

Graham Greene's novel, *The Power and the Glory*, describes a priest who ministered to people in an era of religious persecution in Mexico. The danger of being caught by the police and the exhausting work of serving the people finally took their toll. The priest turned to alcohol as balm and defense against the harsh realities of his life. Eventually he was caught, sentenced to die, and put in prison to await execution.

When he awoke on the morning of his execution, empty brandy flask in hand, he suddenly caught sight of his own shadow on the wall of the prison cell. He just sat there, staring at it. As he did, he realized it was foolish of him to think he was strong enough to remain behind and minister to the people. He should have fled like everyone else.

Knowing what risks to take and when requires a wise heart, greater discretion and discernment than we frequently possess. The one talent servant thought he was acting wisely, given his perception of the master. But his discretion was merely a mask for laziness and cowardice, the two greatest enemies of the spiritual life.

Laziness and cowardice put our own present comfort before the love of God. They fear the uncertainty of the future because they place no trust in God. Laziness flies from all risk. Discretion flies from useless risk: but urges us to take the risks that faith and the grace of God demand of us.

The "whiskey priest," as Greene dubs his main character, risked his life to hear the confession of a dying man, even though he suspected it was a trap. It was. He was arrested. Now, awaiting his execution, tears formed in his eyes and rolled down his cheeks.

He was not crying because he was afraid to die. He was crying because he had to go to God so empty-handed. "He felt like someone who had missed happiness by seconds at an appointed place. He knew now that at the end there was only one thing that counted - to be a saint."

For whatever reason what counts most is seen in a new light from the perspective of the end of our lives. Imagine feeling at the end of your life that you missed happiness by seconds at an appointed place, either because you were afraid to live, to risk what was

entrusted to you, or because you lacked the necessary discretion to know what risks to take and when.

Returning to God empty handed is not as frightful as returning to God with an unused gift, securely wrapped in its original paper. Making an idol of security is how we create inner and outer darkness. Joy lies in taking the risks faith and the grace of God demand of us.

Let us pray for wise and discerning hearts to know the risks worth our lives and for the courage to embrace them.