

November 16, 2008
St James Episcopal Church, Fremont, CA
27th Sunday of Pentecost; Propers 28
The Rev. Kathy Crary

Nothing is easy in today's Gospel. First, we prayed the great Collect for the Word. We are encouraged to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest these Scriptures and it hits on a day when Scriptures are hard and flinty and edgy.

Let's recap the story. We have one master and three slaves or servants on stage. These slaves have a close enough relationship with the owner that he has a sense of their abilities and hands them the money accordingly. The interchange between the Master, at his return, and slaves One and Two is really formulaic. Nobody pays much attention to them after the Master praises them.

Everyone's eyes are on the guy who buried his master's money. The slave's motivation was his fear. Lose the money and all hell will break loose. Bury the money, his mind told him. At least you won't lose anything.

In today's financial climate, he might be seen as prudent. This is the guy who stuffs his money into a mattress or a woman who cuts a hole in the sheet rock, deposits the money, repairs the wall and paints it. 50 years later, at demolition of the wall for a remodel, a stack of money surfaces and everyone is surprised.

I'm not going to stand here and tell you how to manage your money. Also, I'm not going to stand here and shake a finger at you about how you're doing in that arena today. Financial leaders and financial markets are in upheaval. People have a right to be concerned. And I will come back to this in a minute.

Here is what I hear in this lesson today. The Master has been teaching the servants how to handle money. Listen again to one phrase out of the beginning that shows he knows his servants:

He summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability.

I'll call the servants by their numbers. Mr. Five gets a boon. This is serious money for him to handle. The Master conveys his absolute trust in this guy by the number of talents given over to his care.

Mr. Two, on the other hand, is a little like middle management. He has some skills and abilities and a lesser though substantial amount of money.

Mr. One Talent, however, is given a goodly sum of money but significantly less than his companion servants.

If Mr. Master is doing this by abilities, based on the way he does business, he certainly gets the results he intended. The ones who know his system of risk-taking and commitment to the money-making world do better. Obviously he has less confidence in Mr. One Talent.

Now I start asking post-modern, post Enlightenment questions to this scenario. If One Talent Man has less ability, why give him any money? Make Mr. Two into Mr. Three. But would this cause a rebellion between One and Two, now known as Three and None? Would the others have treated Mr. None badly because he had none, as the master had shown him no honor, they didn't need to, either?

Servants Five and Two responded to the trust as a challenge to do better. Mr. One Talent reacted out of fear and buried what he had been given. It was not shared, committed or risked.

For me, today, that is the part to take home and ponder. Not the rebuke or the casting out into a dark region where everyone is weeping and gnashing their teeth (Is that Wall Street?). It is the presence of fear, the absence of commitment, the aversion to risk.

Committing our whole lives to God is akin to taking a step off a cliff into nowhere. Jesus knew that when he prayed in Gethsemane and as he dragged a cross through the streets of Jerusalem.

We talk about God's comfort and the care, Good Shepherd and the still waters. But tied to that is conquering fear with love, wherever we see fear rear its head. It is risking ourselves in sharing the message of Jesus Christ by what we say and by what we do. It is taking the risk and putting ourselves out there when all the world challenges us to bury ourselves deeply in our homes and behind the doors of the church.

I fully understand Mr. One Talent's fears. There are times I have reacted out of fear. Those things are summarized as things done and things left undone.

And I understand the writers of the Gospels when they push back hard against Mr. One Talent and us when we succumb to the pressures of fear.

The writer of John's Gospel reminds us that Jesus came to give us abundant life, the Psalmist reminds us of both the valley of the shadow of death and the table prepared there and the over-flowing cup placed in our hands.

I don't know what risks you are facing. It might be about money. It may be risking reputation to be seen as a believer. It may be about your relationships with power or influence. You might be in a new place about healing, anger or grief.

We are asked to step out in faith in the middle of our darkest struggles. This is about being generous in tight financial times, gracious in difficult moments, forgiving when some takes advantage of us, loving when the gut-wrenching fear takes hold of us. That is how God changes us and the world.

God has entrusted us with all the talents.

We are promised God's support in all our endeavors. Jesus has taken the risk of facing death and he has entrusted much into our hands. Let us pray that the wind of the Spirit blows through this House of God to take the risks God has given us and be seen as good and faithful servants.