

# Taking the Risk

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Cinda Gorman at  
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio  
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- Matthew 25:14-30 <sup>14</sup>“For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; <sup>15</sup>to one he gave five talents,<sup>[a]</sup> to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. <sup>16</sup>The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. <sup>17</sup>In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. <sup>18</sup>But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. <sup>19</sup>After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. <sup>20</sup>Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.’ <sup>21</sup>His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ <sup>22</sup>And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.’ <sup>23</sup>His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ <sup>24</sup>Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; <sup>25</sup>so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ <sup>26</sup>But his master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? <sup>27</sup>Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. <sup>28</sup>So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. <sup>29</sup>For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. <sup>30</sup>As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

Language, especially the English language, is a messy business. If you, a friend or a student of yours was trying to learn to speak English, you quickly found out how strange English is if you try to engage in a conversation. Inconsistent verb tenses, strange spellings, and multiple meanings for the same word that are totally different **all make** for a frustrating experience.

When I stepped into the pulpit in mid-November of 1975 in my first congregation in rural Michigan, I was surprised to see so many women whose husbands were not with them in the pew. The children were there. The grandparents hadn’t left for Florida so they were still there. But many of the men were MIA.

Now, if I were to tell you that this was because of the “bucks” you might think they stayed away because they suspected I would be preaching about money...you know the dreaded stewardship sermon. But that wasn’t what left their pew space empty that day. They were gone because of the *bucks*... Today, November 15, is the opening of deer hunting season in Michigan. Those “bucks” ruled the day.

We have a similar problem when we read the parable that is the focus of today’s lectionary Gospel text. It’s familiar to all of us and we know it as the Parable of the *Talents*. Our minds automatically go to the standard English definition of “talent.” Parents are always pleased to recognize a new talent in a child and some invest great sums of money in developing it with lessons and teams sports.

Our older son, who lives in Oregon, is a gifted writer, editor, teacher, publisher, and now, with his latest book, Ben can claim “poet” with a newly published book. And recently, on

a whim, he bought some paint supplies, set up a tripod and canvas in his living room and astonished all of us with his first three paintings posted on Facebook. He definitely has *talent*.

Some people have a *talent* for dancing or singing or acting. Others can sculpt or design jewelry. Playing a musical instrument is a talent. It's often the visual and performing arts where we readily acknowledge *talent*.

Our son here in Cleveland has *talent* for designing and building things of wood...from fences to gates, from decks to chicken coops and porches. He can make an idea into a sturdy, pleasing reality.

The *visible* and *quantifiable* are the "talents" we may automatically think of when we hear this parable. Alas, we are victims of the English language. A talent in Ancient Greek τάλαντον, was a unit of weight of approximately 80 pounds, and when used as a unit of money, was valued for that weight of silver. As a unit of currency, a single talent was worth about 6,000 denarii. A denarius was the usual payment for a day's labor. So, if you do the math, at one denarius per day, a single talent was therefore worth 16 years of labor. (*various sources*) Two thousand or FIVE thousand "talents" was a fortune.

The medieval church interpreted the "talents" in Jesus' parable as spiritual gifts which God bestows on Christians. During the Reformation, John Calvin helped shape the modern meaning of the word talent when he defined the talents in this story as **gifts from God in the form of a person's calling and natural ability**. What began as a parable with money as an illustration became a story about all kinds of resources.

There was an interlude between my pastoral ministry and our assignment as Mission Co-Workers in Egypt. During that three years I had the flexibility to be the Moderator of the Presbytery of Cincinnati and become certified as a Strengthsfinder 2.0 coach. That certification training and coaching opened my eyes to a whole new way of seeing and helping individuals, teams and church Sessions develop their "talents." A brief online preference assessment sorts out a person's top five from the thirty-four of them that are identified by such words as Intellection, Learner, Maximizer, Positivity, Relater, Responsibility, Restorative, Self-assurance, Significance, Strategic etc etc.....Who KNEW that what we may take for granted because they come naturally to us are the Talents or Resources we are called to develop two fold and five fold instead of burying.

Our resources of all kinds are to be used for the common good and for God's glory. According to Calvin in his *New Testament Commentaries*, God put us here to work in the Kingdom, and "the nature of the kingdom of Christ is that it every day grows and improves."

Calvin made it clear that the use of our resources is not restricted to the church or to pious duties. It encompasses the whole of creation. Therefore **Calvin's doctrine of being "called" emphasizes the utility, activity, and purposeful nature of God's work in the world**. I. (*Institute for Faith, Work and Economics/* -Hugh Whelchel January 17, 2013 [tifwe.org](http://tifwe.org))

Being "called" isn't just for people who wear a clerical collar or serve full time in a specific ministry. Alister McGrath, in an article on the topic of "calling," suggests that for Calvin: *The idea of a calling or vocation is first and foremost about being called by God, to serve (God) within (God's) world. Work was thus seen as an activity by which Christians could deepen their faith, leading it on to new qualities of commitment to God.* (*Institute for Faith, Work and Economics/* Hugh Welch/ April 16, 2012 [tifwe.org](http://tifwe.org))

Do you hear the echo here of something called "*The Protestant work ethic?* ....The Protestant Work Ethic we inherited from our Puritan Founders *emphasizes that hard work, discipline, and frugality are a result of a person's subscription to the values advocated by the Protestant faith, particularly Calvinism.*(*wiki-work ethic*)

But for others that limited interpretation of a work ethic may not be appropriate.

- for people who have reached a mandatory retirement age from their “life work” and feel put out to pasture,
- for people who are out of work due to the inequities of our economy or what skills are /or/ are not considered “valuable”
- for those who are poorly prepared due to the education provided in various school systems
- Millennials whose work experience is vastly different and life choices aren’t measured by hours on the clock,
- for those who are unemployed due to the Covid pandemic or whose job isn’t considered *essential*
- even for those who have made the choice NOT to subscribe to this “work ethic,”

For these people and folks in other cultures, this understanding of Calvin’s interpretation might be unacceptable. IF THAT WAS WHERE CALVIN STOPPED! **But he didn’t.**

Calvin encouraged believers to be involved as salt and light in the world. Scholar Paul Marshall describes Calvin’s challenge to believers as a call *“to work, to perform, to develop, to progress, to change, to choose, to be active, and to overcome until the day of their death or the return of their Lord.”* (*Institute for Faith, Work and Economics/ Hugh Welchel/ April 10,2012 tifwe.org*)

When I read those words preparing for this sermon, I thought about someone who is a great example of those verbs. Two summers ago Steve and I were taking a tour of some new buildings on our college campus in Spokane, Washington. We met up with the staff in the new offices of the religious studies department. In the course of the conversation I mentioned that Gail Fielding was my sister.

*GAIL FIELDING! She’s your SISTER? Why she’s an ICON around here!* And then I got an earful about her activities with the Women’s Auxiliary, the Athletic Booster Club, and the individually wrapped Buc Brownies she makes for EVERY team member before the bus or plane leaves for a road game. Of course I already knew all of those things because that’s what she writes e-mails about. To me, Gail isn’t an “icon.” She’s the oldest sibling. She RUNS things. She’s totally human and brings all of the good and some of the not-so-perfect to the family. Sometimes I’m smart enough to just step back and let her have at it rather than collide with our competing Strengths. (And by the time we have a birthday ZOOM call for her tonight, she will have heard that!)

**“To work, to perform, to develop, to progress, to change, to choose, to be active, and to overcome until the day of her death or the return of her Lord”** describes this woman who moved back to our alma mater to raise two boys on her own after a divorce, earned a Master’s Degree in Library Science while working as a Reference librarian to support the family and cover their tuition, and juggled extra jobs at a local hospital and her church. Until she fell out of favor with the new pastor at the church she joined 45 years ago, she was the wedding reception coordinator and provided meals for most of the church evening meetings.

When she had to retire from the library and was blocked from some of her roles at the church, she went into high gear making soup and casseroles. If Gail finds out

- you are facing surgery,
- have come home from the hospital with a broken whatever
- or just need some encouragement, she’s at your door with food.

Her favorite field trip is Costco. She promises me she is being safe during Covid. She’s using her cane and is not going out when It’s too nasty. And today, November 15<sup>th</sup>, is her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Gail has not buried the resources God has entrusted to her. She doesn't have the "big bucks" in a portfolio. She has never owned her own home as a single woman, and may not have the financial wherewithal to move into a cushy retirement community. But her reward in other ways will be more than doubled. Someday (and I hope not soon!) she will hear, 'Well done. You have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' And believe me, if our Master puts her in charge of many things in heaven, she will have eternal happiness!

John Buchanan, former pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago wrote about the servant who buried his resources in a field and contrasted him to those who take the risk of investing them in something that would grow and make a difference. His words may bring to mind someone YOU know who has taken a risk at life rather than play it safe.

*"The greatest risk of all, it turns out, is not to risk anything.*

- *not to care deeply and profoundly enough about anything to invest deeply, to give your heart away and in the process risk everything.*
- *The greatest risk of all, it turns out, is to play it safe,*
- *to live cautiously and prudently.*

*(He continues) Orthodox, conventional theology identifies sin as pride and egotism. However, there is an entire other lens through which to view the human condition. It is called sloth, one of the ancient church's seven deadly sins. Sloth means*

- *not caring,*
- *not loving,*
- *not rejoicing,*
- *not living up to the full potential of our humanity,*
- *playing it safe,*
- *investing nothing,*
- *being cautious and prudent,*
- *(in short) digging a hole and burying (our resources) in the ground.*

*"Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that the sin of respectable people is running from responsibility. Bonhoeffer, who was a pacifist, took his own responsibility so seriously he joined the Resistance and helped plan an assassination attempt on Hitler's life. His sense of responsibility cost him his life.*

*"How important is this personally, in terms of how we live our lives? Jesus' warning is that the outcome of playing it safe – not caring, not loving passionately, not investing yourself, not risking anything – is something akin to death, like being banished to the outer darkness."*

*(John Buchanan – Matthew Commentary/Feasting on the Word – CD-Rom WORDsearch)*

That invitation into the joy of our Master should be our prevailing motivation for our labors. We are servants of a generous, loving Master who brings us into relationship with himself. Therefore, we offer all we have and all we are back to him in response to the gracious work he has done for us. (This article is republished with permission from the Institute for Faith, Work & Economics at [www.tifwe.org](http://www.tifwe.org)).

Take your pick: Where will you take a risk? *"to work, to perform, to develop, to progress, to change, to choose, to be active, and to overcome until the day of our death or the return of our Lord."* Covid is not keeping any one of us from every one of those.

No, it's not about the Bucks. *"The greatest risk of all, it turns out, is not to risk anything.*  
Where will you begin?