

Matthew 25:14-30 (CEB)

“The kingdom of heaven is like a man who was leaving on a trip. He called his servants and handed his possessions over to them. To one he gave five valuable coins, and to another he gave two, and to another he gave one. He gave to each servant according to that servant’s ability. Then he left on his journey. After the man left, the servant who had five valuable coins took them and went to work doing business with them. He gained five more. In the same way, the one who had two valuable coins gained two more. But the servant who had received the one valuable coin dug a hole in the ground and buried his master’s money. Now after a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. The one who had received five valuable coins came forward with five additional coins. He said, ‘Master, you gave me five valuable coins. Look, I’ve gained five more.’ His master replied, ‘Excellent! You are a good and faithful servant! You’ve been faithful over a little. I’ll put you in charge of much. Come, celebrate with me.’ The second servant also came forward and said, ‘Master, you gave me two valuable coins. Look, I’ve gained two more.’ His master replied, ‘Well done! You are a good and faithful servant. You’ve been faithful over a little. I’ll put you in charge of much. Come, celebrate with me.’ Now the one who had received one valuable coin came and said, ‘Master, I knew that you are a hard man. You harvest grain where you haven’t sown. You gather crops where you haven’t spread seed. So I was afraid. And I hid my valuable coin in the ground. Here, you have what’s yours.’ His master replied, ‘You evil and lazy servant! You knew that I harvest grain where I haven’t sown and that I gather crops where I haven’t spread seed? In that case, you should have turned my money over to the bankers so that when I returned, you could give me what belonged to me with interest. Therefore, take from him the valuable coin and give it to the one who has ten coins. Those who have much will receive more, and they will have more than they need. But as for those who don’t have much, even the little bit they have will be taken away from them. Now take the worthless servant and throw him out into the farthest darkness.’ People there will be weeping and grinding their teeth.”

One of the things that I’ve discovered during this pandemic, where I’ve had a little more time to do things I previously always found an excuse not to do, is that whenever I really need a boost of energy, instead of turning to incredible amounts of caffeine, as I’ve done previously, if I go for a long run, I’ll be energized all day. It seems counterintuitive that expending energy will give you more, but it’s a scientifically proven fact that exercise can boost levels of energy. Often I’ll find myself totally forgetting to make coffee on the days I go on my longest runs because I

don't feel the need for a cup, whereas before I've been quite addicted to the stuff. There are lots of things in life that seem counterintuitive on paper, but in practice they really work. Think about the phenomenon of placebos in drug trials. People who are given sugar pills in place of real medication will find themselves improving like they had taken the real medicine, just because they thought they had been. There are even cases where people are told they'd been given the placebos, but they show signs of improvement anyway. It doesn't make any logical sense, but it happens, and it happens often. Something else that seems counterintuitive but is really true is in how to increase productivity. It turns out that working more doesn't mean more work gets done, often it means less gets done. Researchers have found that the best way to increase productivity is to make sure you're well rested. If you're really pressed at the office with tons to do and you find yourself working 80 hours a week to meet deadlines, you'll actually accomplish more with better results if you cut that 80 hours back to 55 and spend more time getting sleep instead of toiling away on whatever it is you have to do. 55 hours a week is still too much, of course, but it shows that working more is not the solution we think it is. Being overworked is not only harmful for productivity, it's also harmful to your health. Countries where expectations for work are incredibly high also have the highest rates of suicide and alcoholism, among many other problems. Liz and I saw this firsthand in Korea, which ranks as the third highest country for hours worked and where alcoholism is an incredible problem, especially among those that are overworked. There are countless other examples of counterintuitive solutions to problems that plague us - from how to boost self-confidence to solving physics problems. And while the solutions may seem counterintuitive, they really make sense once we step back and think about them. Exercise boosts energy because it creates endorphins and other brain chemicals that energize us; getting good rest instead of working through exhaustion will lead to clearer thinking and higher levels of energy, so you're able to get more work done in a shorter period of time; and I'm sure there's a good reason why the placebo effect works, but I'm no doctor, so I haven't a clue on that one.

Jesus' parable of the valuable coins has plagued people of faith for centuries because it seems so contradictory to his teachings. In the parable the heroes seem to be those who are given wealth and create more wealth, whereas the villain is the one who holds on to what he was given because he knew his master was harsh and possibly a thief, and didn't want to risk losing what was entrusted to him. Everywhere else in the gospels Jesus is pretty explicit that gaining wealth isn't necessarily a good thing - what's good is giving away your excess so that the poor and dispossessed can have access. Added to the confusion is that the wealthy master, in his admonishment of the servant who was given one coin, said that he should have at least put the coin in the bank to gain interest, but Jewish law forbade the charging of interest by money lenders, and that's how money put in the bank is able to gain interest in the first place, so what's really happening?

Like the counterintuitive solutions we find in life, we need to take a step back and reexamine what's happening in Jesus' parable. We should remember, too, that parables use the world around us to point to a deeper truth, and the deeper truth is rarely found as a direct parallel to the story being told. So let's take another look at the story Jesus is telling in this passage. The first person we encounter in the parable is the wealthy man who was preparing to go on a trip. We know nothing else about him except that he's wealthy and apparently likes to travel. In his preparations he called his three servants and divided his wealth among them, according to their abilities, we're told. One servant was given five coins, one two coins, and the final servant one coin, then the wealthy man went on his trip. This is a good point to go ahead and step back because there's already a lot of information we're given that we should process. The first thing to consider is the character of the wealthy man - we don't know much except that he entrusted his entire wealth to three servants. I don't know about you, but if I'm going on a trip I'm not going to give control of my bank account to anyone, not even members of my own family, so it seems that this wealthy fella is quite trusting of his servants. I can't think of anything that would have stopped them from taking the money they were given and running, but they didn't. So there is clearly a good relationship here based on trust. The other thing to consider is the money - how much are we really talking about? The parable is about coins, and in our world, coins just aren't that valuable, so is this really any great sum of money? What is translated as "valuable coin" in the Common English Bible is really "talent," which isn't a talent, as in skill that one may have, but an actual monetary unit in antiquity that was tied to weight. A Roman talent from Jesus' day would have weighed approximately 71 pounds 3 ounces and was an equivalent to somewhere between 9 and 20 years worth of wages for a skilled laborer. So it is a huge amount of money. If we take the weight equivalent of the value of gold and silver today, a silver talent would be worth about \$25,900, and a gold talent would be worth \$2,024,000. We don't know if the talents in the parable were gold or silver, but does it really matter? When we think about these huge sums of money, it only makes the trust given to the servants that much bigger.

When the rich man came back from his travels, he met with his servants to see how they did with his money - and the two given more were able to double what was given to them. We don't know how they did it or in what time frame they did it, all we know is that they were given a huge sum of money and doubled it for their master by putting it to work. The master responded by celebrating with them and putting them in charge of even more - their status was elevated. The third servant, however, buried his talent in order to keep it safe. His reasoning was that he knew his master was "a hard man" who "reaps what he doesn't sow." When I've read this passage earlier in life I have always tended to take the servants' word on the master's character, but based on the actions of the master told to us through the parable, he doesn't seem to be a bad guy. He trusted his servants with a lifetime of wealth, after

all, and then celebrated their successes with them. So why do we let the foolish servant change our view of the wealthy guy? The rich man stood up for himself by saying, “if you thought I was such a bad guy, why didn’t you at least put it in the bank to let it accrue interest” – the implication being that if the servant had such a low opinion of him, why wouldn’t he engage in forbidden behavior to grow what was given to him instead of just sitting on it? What we can see, if we look carefully at this story, is that the foolish servant is foolish because his actions were driven by fear. He chose inaction, which was actually worse than acting unscrupulously. Finally, we’re met with the very contradictory sounding phrase, “Those who have much will receive more, and they will have more than they need. But as for those who don’t have much, even the little bit they have will be taken away from them.” It seems to be the exact opposite of what Jesus was saying when he said, “the last will be first and the first will be last.”

Having unpacked the parable more, though, we can glean the true meaning of this counterintuitive phrase. Just like when farming parables aren’t really about farming, this money parable isn’t really about money. It’s about the gifts that have been entrusted to us by God. God has given us the keys to the Kingdom in gifts of the Spirit. In this way the “talents” of the parable are the “talents” we’ve been given through the Holy Spirit. The key to understanding this parable is to acknowledge that we are given all we need to be successful as disciples of Christ if we seek to use the gifts entrusted to us for growth. One commenter on this passage has said that for this growth to occur, we have to believe in grace. If grace is what we expect, grace is what we’ll get, but if fear is what we expect, fear is what we’ll receive. There are some good lessons to learn from the world of finance that can inform our faith, so it’s not like the money aspects of the parable are without merit. In finance, any investment that grows wealth comes with risk. Safer bets, the ones with less risk, will see lower rates of growth, but very risky bets could have the potential to have huge growth. And so it is with our faith – God calls us to be risk takers for the Kingdom. Whereas in the world of finance you face the possibility of financial ruin if the risk turns bad, in our faith taking risks for the sake of God’s love will never turn bad, because even if we are met with death, we’ve been offered life through Christ. If nothing can harm us, then there’s no risk too great to take. Let me be clear with what I mean by risk. I don’t mean investing our money in get rich quick schemes, and I don’t mean jumping off tall buildings or any other such behavior. The risks I’m speaking of are risky because they turn away from what the world expects of us in favor of doing as God expects. When the world says “seek revenge,” God says “forgive.” When the world says “hate,” God says “love.” When the world says, “you only get my help if you meet these requirements,” God says, “you don’t have to do anything, help is yours.” The only thing in our way of this risky behavior is fear. Franklin Delano Roosevelt said “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself,” and while he wasn’t speaking of faith in the speech that quote is from, it’s true for our faith, too. It is fear that separates us

from God. Our responsibility is to use the gifts entrusted to our care to grow God's kingdom on earth. If we use our gifts for growth, we'll find we have more than we could ever need. But if we refuse to use our gifts out of fear, we'll lose everything. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian who laid down his life to speak out against Hitler and the Nazi regime, said, "The sin of respectable people is running away from responsibility." Sin is fear, sin is inaction. Friends, God has entrusted us with much. With what we have been given, we can engage in risky acts of love and see growth, or we can sit on the sidelines out of fear. My hope is that as we continue to engage Matthew 25 and find new ways to serve God by serving our community, we'll be more ready to give up our fear in favor of risky acts of love and grace. It seems counterintuitive to choose risky behavior instead of "safe" actions, but fear is the death of faith, trust in risky promises is life. Thanks be to God. Amen.