

Covenant Word

Playing It Safe

Psalms 123; I Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30

*A Message by
The Reverend Sarah
Jackson Shelton
Pastor
Sunday
November 19, 2017*

**Dear Friends,
Thank you for
wanting to read and
study these thoughts
more carefully.
Please know that I do
not take full credit for
anything that may be
contained within,
because I may have
read or heard
something at some
point during my
pilgrimage and do not
remember its source
and thus, cannot give
the rightful author
his/her credit. I pray
that you will find
inspiration and
encouragement.**



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Worship with us each Sunday
morning at 9 a.m. and for Bible
study at 10:30 a.m.

He was an intense little man. When I remember him, I wonder if he possessed the best disposition to be a high school band director. In his heart, he was a conductor of beautiful music. His desire was for glorious symphonies to come from the tip of his baton. Concert season, therefore, was what he lived for. The fact that we were to be a marching band for half the year was just a nuisance. A peer once told him that when Mtn. Brook's marching band took the field at half time that it sounded like a floating symphony. I was impressed that he could hear us at all. A mere 50 members up against other high school bands of hundreds, our efforts were often lost in the noise of the fans in the stands.

I could never decide if we lived in fear or in awe of Mr. Whitman. He was notorious for throwing his baton at sections that lagged behind his direction. It was not beyond him to walk out of rehearsals in complete frustration, slamming doors as he went. It was not unlike him to grab his music stand with such vehemence that his score sheets flew around the podium upon which he stood in order for us to see him. I suspect that he didn't have much support from the administration. The band room was in the bowels of the school. There were no windows through which we could be distracted, and it was located right across the hall from the football team's locker rooms. Between their sweat and our spit, it was not the most appealing part of the school's facilities.

And we, the members of the band? We were not the most popular part of the school's student body. Oh, we were smart! There were plenty of honor students. And we were

talented: most all of the first chair players also secured first chair placements in Alabama's annual All Star Band. Their performance medals were on display up and down the lapels of their uniforms. So, Whitman had a core of multi-talented players, but for the most part, the majority of the band was made up of one talent musicians. And no matter how much he railed at us or how much we practiced, we were still only going to be one talent players.

I was so intimidated by Mr. Whitman's intensity that I would lug my instrument home, carve out a space in my closet, shut the door and practice inside. I didn't want anyone to hear me for fear that I would make a mistake or not meet expectation, or that my horn would betray me by squeaking loudly. In private lessons with Mr. Whitman, he would get exasperated over my timidity. He would say, "Sarah, if you are going to make a mistake, at least make a big one!"

I wonder if this is what Jesus is saying to us in today's parable.

In order to be faithful to the text, I need to separate our understanding of "talent" and "treasure." Jesus is clearly talking about treasure. We know this because of the amazing amounts of money that he is describing. The

What would you do if someone placed that kind of trust in your hands? Could you live into bigger dreams and larger expectations?

Greek word for "talent" describes a unit of money that is enormous. It is larger than 16 years of collective earnings. So when this man goes on a journey and leaves funds in his stewards' care, we are not talking about 20 or 30 bucks. Rather, to the first steward, approximately two million dollars is given. To the second, a million and a half; and to the third a half million. A total of four million dollars! That is quite a gift, and it possesses staggering responsibility. Because sums like these are not handed over glibly, we can only assume that the owner is a generous man and the stewards are known, trusted, perhaps even groomed to take on such a gift. What would you do if someone placed that kind of trust in your hands? Could you live into bigger dreams and larger expectations? (Marci Auld Glass, "Unburied Treasure," on the blog, Glass Overflowing, 11-13-2011)

Two of the stewards seem to do just that. The scripture says that they take off at once. Neither of them wait around. Neither need detailed instructions. Instead, both go right to work, seemingly without a second thought. The immediacy of their response speaks to a feeling of freedom that they somehow feel. It is a type of freedom that will determine success or failure. It is a freedom in which you have enough room to make it big or to make a big mistake. They, however, are not listening to any fear that may be creeping into their hearts. They are full steam ahead taking risks, being as faithful as they can and trusting, trusting that all of their investments will work for their master's advantage by the time he returns. Somehow they each have the inner resources to live with confidence... confidence in themselves and confidence that their perception of their master as trustworthy, faithful and generous is correct. With this kind of image of their master, they are free to take all kinds of risks and to live boldly.

It works for them, of course. They double their master's investments, and he is pleased. He is so pleased that the stewards see a side of him that is even more trustworthy, even more faithful, and even more generous. But then, the parable doesn't end there.

The one talent slave also acts as soon as the master leaves. He, however, does not run to Wall Street. Rather, he goes off by himself, digs a hole in the ground and buries the talent. To be fair, rabbinic law purported that if someone entrusts you with their money, you should bury it so that you are not liable for anything that might happen to it. This action contains not one ounce of risk. It is playing it safe at its best.

With such a drastically different response, we have to pause to wonder why his behavior is so starkly different. Why doesn't he feel the freedom to take a risk and venture out boldly? Perhaps the answer lies in his response to the master upon the master's return. "Master," he says, "I know you are a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I hid your talent in the ground. Here, have back what is yours."

Given what we have already witnessed in the other two stewards, does this character analysis seem out of place to you? Nowhere else in the story is the master painted as a harsh extortionist. The other two servants feel freedom, but what this one feels is captivity. They see generosity. He sees a trick. They venture out boldly, risking it all for the sake of a great return. He decides to play it safe and is concerned with self-protection. They are buoyed by trust.

Jesus embraces the freedom God gave him, because Jesus knows God to be even more trustworthy, faithful and generous than we can ever imagine God to be.

Tom Long in his commentary on Matthew says that each steward is received by the master as they perceive him to be. The first two expect generosity and, in return, receive gracious praise and delight. But this last steward who insists on viewing his master as oppressive, cruel and fear provoking, gets just that. He gets what he expects, and so he is tossed into the outer darkness into a place of despair and isolation that I am sure is a familiar place to him.

At this point, I think it is important to remember who is telling this story. Jesus, the biggest risk taker of all, could have played it safe. His fear could have had him digging a hole and placing all of his gifts there, playing it safe by staying in the background and never confronting the established religious and political systems of his day. But he did not. Instead, he steps out over and over again to risk his life for the sake of the world...for the sake of the likes of people like you and me. (Kershner) He stands up for those with no voice, who are hungry and sick and on the margins of society. He calls all to repentance and newness. Jesus embraces the freedom God gave him, because Jesus knows God to be even more trustworthy, faithful and generous than we can ever imagine God to be.

The parable seems to support an economic theology (Tom Long, Matthew, p. 2823) where the ways we think about God's nature determines how we live our lives in relationship to God. When we live out of

confidence that God is trustworthy and generous and more benevolent than we can possibly imagine, we, like the first two servants, will discover what it means to live freely and abundantly. We are not afraid to fail, because we know there is grace to try again. Yet if we live like the one-talent steward, we will never have enough of whatever it is we think we lack; in the darkness of fear, and we will remain convinced that God's wrath is stronger than God's mercy. We condemn ourselves, needlessly quivering alone, and the little bit of life we have atrophies, withering away. (Long)

Jesus is clear: kingdom living is not passive. It is not playing it safe, burying faith in a hole because we are scared. This parable encourages us to live our biggest, best self with the

confidence that God really is as compassionate and faithful as Jesus says God is.

It reminds me of Marianne Williamson's quote that Nelson Mandela made famous. It reads:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that frightens us most. We ask ourselves, 'Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and famous?' Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that people won't feel insecure around you. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in all of us. And when we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.

With time, I discovered that my band director, Mr. Whitman, was not a one dimensional talent kind of guy. In the spring of my sophomore year, I had emergency surgery. He came to the hospital every day. He coordinated with all my other teachers about who would

places. You will sit at table with people who have told you your entire life, "You are a one talent person" when you know that you are multi-talented with life giving investments already made in the Kingdom of God. So as you put on your breastplate of faith and love, and the helmet of salvation, take these words of encouragement with you:

Your Baptist Church of the Covenant family loves you. We not only believe you to be amazingly talented, we are grateful for the ways we witness you using your talents. So as you gather with others, don't be afraid. Rather, choose to make the big mistake of erring on the side of grace: welcome those who may have hurt you; love those who might need a word of kindness; forgive those who may be misinformed or who glory in hooking you into divisiveness with their political views. This year, don't fall for it! Do not allow anyone to have this kind of power over you save Jesus Christ. And if you will, do you know what? The kingdom of God will be better for it and you will most assuredly hear the master say: "Well done, good and faithful servant." Thanks be to God, Amen.

So as you gather with others, don't be afraid. Rather, choose to make the big mistake of erring on the side of grace.

excuse me from finals and who would not. And, once I was home, he came to the house every week to check on my recovery. He genuinely cared somewhere under that critical veneer. It was not enough, however, to turn my fear into confidence. So when I graduated from Mountain Brook High School, I never looked back. No, instead, I played it safe. I packed up my instrument and tucked it into the back corner of a closet. Still believing myself to be a one talented musician, I kept moving forward to find the places where my passion and ability might intersect with the world's need. Using spiritual language, I invested my talents in other areas of the Kingdom's work. I think that I am correct in saying that these "investments" have brought about some results for the good. But here's the deal: while my band director may have been so intensely demanding that I lived in fear, he did grow within me a love for well executed music that restores my soul to this day. He also passed on to me a certain standard of personal excellence so that when I am living with fear, I hear him whisper in my ear, "Sarah, if you are going to make a mistake, make a big one."

You are heading home for the Thanksgiving holiday or maybe you have people coming to your house. However you do the holidays, you are beginning that long slide into a season that offers multiple opportunities to be with family, friends, co-workers and a multitude of others, some of who drive you nuts or cause you to revisit some dark