

Risky Business
Rev. Dr. Glenda Hollingshead; November 15, 2026
Matthew 25:14-30

Our reading from the Gospel of Matthew is frequently used to teach the value of making the best of our God-given gifts—be they time, talents, or treasures. I am sure you have heard numerous sermons preached along these lines. I've preached a few myself. But as I pondered the parable this week, I was compelled to meander down a different path—one that invited me to consider other gifts the story has to offer. Let's take a closer look.

Earlier in the chapter, Jesus warns those who wish to enter the kingdom of heaven to *keep their lamps trimmed and burning*. (That was our text for last Sunday, you may recall.) Then, he tells a parable about a wealthy man who departs on a long journey. Before he leaves, he distributes his property to three slaves—each according to his ability. After a long time, the master returns to settle accounts. He is pleased to find that, in his absence, the first two slaves make wise investments to double their money. The third slave, however, takes a different approach. He buries his treasure because he's afraid to take a risk. More than that, he's afraid of his master. In response, the master chastises him and sends him to outer darkness.

At first glance, the master may appear heartless and concerned only about money, but the story is not really about amassing wealth. The story is more about a master, a slave, and their relationship. So, what do we know about the master? We know that he has abundant resources with which he is generous. We know this because he is able to entrust to one slave 5 talents (the equivalent of 75 years of wages); to another, 2 talents (the equivalent of 30 years of wages); and to the last, 1 talent (the equivalent of 15 years of wages). In other words, all 3 men are given *a lot of money*. We also realize that the master knows his slaves. How do we know that? Because he gives each one according to his ability. Thus, before the master ever departs, he anticipates what he will find upon his return.

And what do we know about the slave who digs a hole to hide his talent in the ground? We know what he thinks of his master. He thinks his master is harsh, reaping where he does not sow, and gathering what is not his to gather. More importantly, we recognize that he acts out of fear. He expects his master to be harsh. Ironically, because of his lack of trust, he gets exactly what he expects. And isn't that the way of life? Don't we often get exactly what we expect?

Imagine with me for a moment, a friend who is in the habit of starting every conversation with what is WRONG with her life—or with any given situation. How often does such an attitude become a self-fulfilling prophecy? On the other hand, bring to mind a friend who looks for the good in people. He even has the audacity to look for new possibilities in stressful situations, hopeful that a better day is just around the corner. Isn't it true that he, too, often gets exactly what he is looking for—better outcomes, better opportunities?

Scholar David Lose has this to say on the matter:

> What we expect is most often what we see. Do we see conflict as something awful and to avoid at all costs? Then it probably will be. Do we instead imagine conflict as a chance to grow and stretch? If so, then we will probably experience it as just that. Is a crisis a threat or an opportunity? Is a challenge a problem to overcome or a mystery to be embraced? Is someone who disagrees with us an opponent or colleague? Again and again, our experience of life is so very deeply shaped by our expectations.[i]

Attitudes and expectations fuel the poem penned by the 13th century Persian poet, Rumi:

> Once a believer asked the angel of the Gate,
> "Is it true that hell is the road through which both believers and unbelievers pass?
> For on my way here, I saw neither smoke, nor fire."
> "The road you passed was hell indeed," the angel smiled,
> "but since you have overcome your lower nature, to you it appears as a garden.
> Having planted the seeds of devotion, you transformed the fire of anger into compassion
> and ignorance into wisdom. The thorns of envy have turned into roses

so now your fiery soul has become a rose garden where nightingales sing praises."

Truly, dear Christian, attitudes matter. Expectations matter. And God wants us to expect great things because God cannot wait to fulfill our hopes and dreams. In fact, many of our deepest desires have been planted in our hearts by none other than God's own Spirit. So yes, God wants us to dream and dream big. But first, we must believe that God wants good for us and not evil. We must believe that God is in the wonder-working business.

God is in another business, too. God is in the business of taking risks. Think about it. God creates all that lives and moves and breathes. God forms humanity in God's own image and entrusts us with the care of creation. God gives us freedom, knowing full well that we will not always use it wisely. And when the world needs more than a little help, God takes an even greater risk. God takes on flesh and comes among us as a helpless baby. God places divine love in human hands, trusting us with a gift we might easily overlook, reject, or even crucify. That is quite a risk! But God takes it anyway—for love's sake. That is what love does. It makes us vulnerable. It asks us to step beyond what is comfortable and venture into what is uncertain. It asks us to reach out, to trust, to hope, and sometimes to risk getting hurt. William Arthur Ward captures this beautifully in his poem, "To Risk." Listen to his words.

To laugh is to risk appearing a fool,
To weep is to risk appearing sentimental.
To reach out to another is to risk involvement,
To expose feelings is to risk exposing your true self.
To place your ideas and dreams before a crowd is to risk their loss.
To love is to risk not being loved in return,
To live is to risk dying,
To hope is to risk despair,
To try is to risk failure.
But risks must be taken because the greatest hazard in life is to risk nothing.
The person who risks nothing, does nothing, has nothing, is nothing.
He may avoid suffering and sorrow,
But he cannot learn, feel, change, grow or live.
Chained by his servitude he is a slave who has forfeited all freedom.
Only a person who risks is free.
The pessimist complains about the wind;
The optimist expects it to change;
And the realist adjusts the sails.

When you imagine God, do you imagine God with a clenched fist or an open hand? The Message translation of Psalm 145:16 offers this beautiful description of God: "Generous to a fault, you lavish your favor on all creatures." And notice—not only human creatures—but all living things. All creation is blessed by God's open-handed generosity.

God is the greatest risk-taker of all. And we, formed in God's image, are created to follow suit. We are created to live open-handed and open-hearted lives—to be generous and kind, compassionate and loving. We are not created to think small: not of ourselves, not of our neighbors, and certainly not of God.

Our God is in the business of taking risks for love's sake. And we are invited to join the family enterprise. So, let us loosen our grip, open our hands and hearts, and take a few risks of our own. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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