

† **READING FROM THE GOSPEL: Matthew 25:14-30** (*The Message*)

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If you read or saw the movie, right near the end of C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*, Aslan the Lion takes Lucy, Edmund, Peter and everyone to the New Narnia – to what we would call "heaven" or the New Creation. It is a place of amazing beauty; a place where even every blade of grass seems to mean more and where every creature sings for the sheer joy of the Creator. It is a place where everything is just so real in depth and color that the mere sight of a daisy takes your breath away and makes you weep for the sheer beauty of the thing. But then, right in the midst of all this splendor, the children see a group of dwarves huddled together. These elves are convinced that they are sitting in the rank stench of a barn – a place so dark that they cannot see their hands in front of their faces. Lucy becomes so upset that the dwarves are not enjoying the New Narnia that she begs Aslan to help them to see. Aslan replies, "Dearest Lucy, I will show you what I can do and what I cannot do." Aslan then shakes his golden mane and an extravagant banquet instantly appears in front of the dwarves. Each dwarf is given a plate heaped with juicy meats, glistening vegetables, plump grains of rice. Each also receives a goblet brimming with the finest wine anyone could ever imagine. But when the dwarves dive in and begin eating, they start gagging and complaining. "Doesn't this beat all," they lament. "Not only are we in this stinking stable but now we've got to eat hay and dried cow dung as well!" When they sip the wine, they sputter, "And look at this now! Dirty water out of a donkey's trough!" The dwarves, Aslan goes on to say, had chosen suspicion instead of trust and love. They were prisoners of their own minds. They could not see Aslan's gift of the New Narnia for they would not see it. Aslan can but leave them alone to the hell of their own devising. (Illustration, Center for Excellence in Preaching, November 13, 2011)

The exact same thing seems to happen in our Gospel lesson this morning when a servant falls into the same way of thinking . . . mistrusting his master . . . who is actually his grateful benefactor. The servant is afraid to take a risk . . . to risk what has been given to him. And, I suspect, that sometimes we, too, may choose to be suspicious and fearful of the Lord . . . our grace filled benefactor . . . afraid to take a risk with God's blessings instead of being filled with hopeful expectation.

See what you think as we read together from the 25th chapter of Matthew, verses 14-30, from *The Message*. Those who are able, please stand for the reading.

One: (The Kingdom of Heaven) is also like a man going off on an extended trip. He called his servants together and delegated responsibilities. To one he gave five thousand dollars, to another two thousand, to a third one thousand, depending on their abilities. Then he left.

All: Right off, the first servant went to work and doubled his master's investment. The second did the same. But the man with the single thousand dug a hole and carefully buried his master's money.

One: After a long absence, the master of those three servants came back and settled up with them.

Choir: The one given five thousand dollars showed him how he had doubled his investment. His master commended him: "Good work! You did your job well. From now on be my partner."

People: The servant with the two thousand showed how he also had doubled his master's investment. His master commended him: "Good work! You did your job well. From now on be my partner."

One: The servant given one thousand said, "Master, I know you have high standards and hate careless ways, that you demand the best and make no allowances for error. I was afraid I might disappoint you, so I found a good hiding place and secured your money. Here it is, safe and sound down to the last cent."

Choir: The master was furious. "That's a terrible way to live! It's criminal to live cautiously like that! If you knew I was after the best, why did you do less than the least? The least you could have done would have been to invest the sum with the bankers, where at least I would have gotten a little interest.

All: **"Take the thousand and give it to the one who risked the most. And get rid of this play-it-safe who won't go out on a limb. Throw him out into utter darkness."**

This is the Word of our Lord.

Thanks be to God!

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

He's playing it safe. He isn't about to take a risk with the boss' money. And why not? I for one don't blame him. Look who he's dealing with . . . it seems pretty clear that he's got one bad boss, a boss who sets very high standards. . . a boss who doesn't put up with mistakes . . .you know the kind . . . you'd better be on time . . . and you better watch out because one *oops* and you are gone! At least that's what he's heard about his boss . . . from the rumors . . . the office gossip . . . So this servant isn't about to take any chances. "I'll just put the boss's money under the mattress and when he gets back from his trip . . . I'll hand it back to him . . . every last cent . . . safe and sound."

Now I wonder why don't the other two servants do the same thing? If that boss is so horrible, why don't they do the same thing as the third servant? But look at what they end up doing . . . they take all that money . . . and invest it in the risky commodities market and the stock market

and end up doubling what they started with. They take a big risk with what they are given . . . and it pays off . . . it pays off big time. They aren't afraid . . . they step out and take a risk with what they are given . . . and they end up being made partners in their boss's business. But the third servant . . . the one who takes no risk . . . he ends up being kicked out of his office . . . told to leave . . . because he didn't even take the money he is given and at the least put it in a safe low-yield bank savings account.

Now on the one hand, we can look at this parable and end up being just as scared . . . just as fearful as that unlucky servant . . . because we obviously worship a God who judges us based on what we do . . . on what we accomplish. If we work hard enough at being a good disciple . . . if we use our God-given talents to the max . . . maybe we will be rewarded, too. But if we fail and there's no profit showing up on the balance sheet . . . then we'll end up outside of God's love and grace in a place of darkness. What kind of boss would that be to work for . . . better measure up or you are out of here!

Well . . . thank goodness, that is not who our boss is . . . and that is not what Jesus is trying to get us to understand in this parable . . . because it's actually a parable about unconditional love and amazing grace. The truth is . . . that third servant didn't know his boss. He only believed rumors and gossip . . . even though this boss was actually quite generous with him. The amount of money that the boss gave to all three servants was huge in the time of Jesus . . . the third servant's share actually amounted to the value of 20 years' worth of wages. But this is not a parable about money and the prosperity gospel . . . Jesus, of course, is the boss . . . and the money represents God's grace . . . all of the blessings that are given to us . . . we don't ask for them . . . God just blesses us over and over and over. So what Jesus is asking us to do with these blessings . . . well . . . quite simply . . . we are to bless others . . . and not to be afraid to do it. Jesus wants us to completely trust him . . . and to have radical faith in him . . . Jesus want us to be willing to risk it all for the Kingdom of God. You see . . . the point of this story is that even if the first two had failed in their efforts . . . Jesus would still have blessed them . . . because they weren't afraid to try . . . they were bold in their commitments as disciples of Jesus Christ . . . they were willing to risk what wasn't even theirs . . . because you can do that with God's grace and blessings . . . after all . . . it's all God's anyway.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. Back when the great reformer Martin Luther was under siege by the Pope . . . the Holy Roman Emperor . . . his fellow teacher and reformer Phillip Me-lanch-thon (ton) was left to run things back at Wittenberg while Luther was in hiding. But Phillip had a hard time deciding what to do . . . some of the Reformers wanted quick change . . . others wanted things to stay the same. So Philip wrote to Luther, "If I do this, this could go wrong. If I do that, that could go wrong. I just can't decide; I don't know what to do." He was paralyzed with fear. That's when Luther emphatically wrote back to him, "Look Phillip, you're

right. It is hard to know what the right thing to do is. Anything you do will have some sin in it. Therefore, sin boldly, but trust the grace of God more boldly still!”

I love those powerful words . . . that are so freeing to us . . . “Anything you do will have some sin in it. Therefore, sin boldly . . . but trust the grace of God more boldly still!” Because unlike that poor third servant . . . you, too, can act boldly . . . with whatever you have been given . . . with whatever you can share to build up of God’s Kingdom in this world. That third servant was fearful of his boss . . . he was suspicious and scared of what might happen to him if he did the wrong thing with his master’s money . . . he looked at his blessings and all he could see and taste was hay and dried cow dung and donkey trough water . . . but Jesus tells us . . . don’t worry about it . . . my grace is wonderful . . . my grace is like a plate heaped with juicy meats, glistening vegetables, plump grains of rice and a goblet brimming with the finest wine anyone could ever imagine . . . and what more . . . my grace is more than enough for you . . . my grace and my forgiveness will overcome anything you might do . . . my blessing will never run out . . . so be bold . . . be decisive . . . because I’m not going to forsake you . . . boldly love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and soul . . . and boldly love your neighbor as you love yourself . . . risk everything I have given you . . . your talents . . . your time and your money . . . because it is only your fear that is keeping you from jumping in the river of grace feet first and living your life for God to its fullest!

The truth is . . . we are all like that third servant and Jesus knows it. That’s why Jesus is actually so encouraging in this parable. He’s not trying to scare us . . . or put fear in our hearts . . . no . . . he wants to overwhelm us with his grace and love so that we will have the courage to go and share it abundantly in this world. Of course there are times when we’re afraid to share our money . . . there are plenty of times when we’re uncertain about giving our time or talents for the work and ministry of this church . . . yes, there will be more than enough times that we will mess up everything and do the wrong thing . . . but thanks be to the love and grace of our Savior. . . it’s okay. . . because each time Jesus is there to give us the opportunity to get up, brush ourselves off . . . and start over . . . and then to even be more bold the next time in what we are called to do . . . trusting our Lord and Savior . . . who is always there to guide us.

It’s all about radical grace . . . let me share with you a remarkable story about what it means to give one’s whole life to the Lord . . . to take a complete risk . . . There was a tiny Christian congregation in a village in Kenya. The people met in the open air beneath a thatched roof. When it came time for the offering, a round flat basket was passed up and down the rows of benches as people put in coins and small bills. The basket came to a young woman with two small children. She looked at the basket for a long time. Then she took the basket and placed it on the dirt floor in front of her. Taking off her sandals, she picked up her children, held one on each hip, and stepped right into the offering basket; standing with head bowed . . . praying for

several minutes. Then she stepped out of the basket and passed it on. (*The Lectionary Lab*, Nov. 6, 2011)

Now it's your turn. You've been showered with blessings . . . enough for this life and so many more . . . but what will you do with those blessings? The offering basket has now been passed to you . . . do you . . . like the third servant in the parable . . . pass it on . . . risking nothing and staying in the darkness of your fears? Or do you take a risk . . . do you risk completely . . . trusting Jesus Christ . . . are you brazen enough to step into that basket just like that bold Kenyan mother and give your whole life?

Let us pray:

From all your bounty I give to you;

For all the blessings you impart.

Receive this offering I bring.

Receive my joyful heart.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.