

Risk Management

First Reading: Proverbs 20:4; 26:14-16; 22:13; 6:6-8; 10:26

Second Reading: Matthew 25:14-30

Have you seen it? It may go down as one of the classic *Saturday Night Live* skits, along with *Cheeseburger, Cheeseburger; Two Wild and Crazy Guys; More Cowbell*; and every skit with Keenan Thompson. With guest host Nat Bargaize, the not-ready-for-primetime players recreated the image of George Washington giving a pep talk to his weary and half-frozen militia.

“You need your strength for the fight ahead. We fight for a country of our own, a new nation where we choose our own laws, choose our own leaders, and choose our own system of weights and measures.” “Weights and measures, sir?” “Yes, I dream of a future where one day our proud nation will measure weight in pounds and that 2,000 lbs. shall be called a ton.” “And what will 1,000 lbs. be called, sir?” “Nothing.” ... “We are free men, and we will be free to measure liquids in liters and milliliters, but not all liquids, only soda, wine, and alcohol.” “Only those, sir?” “Yes, because for milk and paint we will use gallons, pints, and quarts, God willing.” “And how many liters are in a gallon, sir?” “Nobody knows.”

“Nobody knows.” It is quite the serpentine journey that brought us to the place where the high jump record of 2.45 meters is indecipherable to those of us who watched Dwight Stones jump 7’7” back in ’76, or where everybody remembers Sammy Hagar singing *I Can’t Drive 55*, but no one pays attention to the km markings on their speedometer. How is the dollar trading against the Turkish Lira, or was it the Swedish Krona? And how many rupees does it take to buy a \$6 Peppermint Mocha in Mumbai? Nobody knows. As far as I know, I may have paid \$50 for a \$7 dollar pizza in Istanbul. I just shoved some lira at them and said a little prayer. It’s all so confusing, but perhaps we can take some comfort in the revelation that it has always been that way.

Just look at the Bible. We’ve got talents, minas, shekels, gerahs, and the all-important denarii which was foremost in the minds of those laborers in the vineyard at the end of the day. We’ve got stadia, cubits, spans, handbreadths, and fingers; homers, cors, lethechs, ephahs, baths, seahs, hins, and omers (not to be confused with homers).

Well, you say, what about bushels? They are in the Bible, so at least we know that, right? “Hide it under a bushel, no, I’m gonna let it shine...”

Um, not so fast. The bushel mentioned in Matthew 5 comes from the Greek word *modios* and amounts to about one-fourth of an American bushel.

Straightforward and intelligible ... not.

So, in attempting to inform his followers how they should live in the time between his departure and return (even though his disciples haven't yet figured out that he's departing or where he is going), Jesus tells them a story, a parable. *“For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.”*

We read this and we think, “I get it ... a talent — Michael can hit a golf ball from here to the moon ... Carol paints a beautiful gladiola ... Amy Collard's grandfather held the world record in the pole vault for 17 years ... Zach plays the organ, piano, djembe, and ukulele, sings like Michael Buble and knows more about wine than I'll ever know — talent, right?”

Well, no, but maybe just a little bit, at least in a metaphorical sense. A talent, from the Greek *talanton*, the word for weight, was a unit of weight often used to measure the value of precious metals for purposes of payment and accounting. Imagine the common balance instrument used for measurement, an image familiar in courtrooms, chemistry labs, and science classes. The weight (often a stone) would be placed on one side and the precious metal, often silver, would be placed on the other side. Balancing the silver with the stone would determine the silver's value. The talent was the largest unit of measure and thus represented a quite significant amount of currency. So exactly how large was a single talent? It depends, are we talking about the heavy standard or the light standard? Are we talking about the Royal Weight or the Common Weight?

And get this — the weights and measurements used in Israel were a mingling of systems from Assyria and Babylon, and the weights bore lettering or symbols from Egypt. Not exactly a friendly neighborhood. And, of course, this is without taking into consideration that 1st Century Israel was subject to Roman rule, and the Romans had their own currency flooding the local economy. Remember? “Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's...”

It's all so confusing. Donna and I met with our financial advisor the other day. Nice guy, but I have to admit that once he started talking about asset allocation and capital gains and tranches, my mind was drifting like the left fielder picking dandelions in the middle of a little league game. I was like the opposite of Renee Zelwegger in *Jerry Maguire* — You lost me at hello. Donna laughed and said, "I thought I married a business major." To which I said, "No, you married a pastor, who before seminary majored in business, which should tell you that the main thing I learned in business school was that I had no interest in pursuing it."

So — talents, minas, shekels, gerahs. Ten different folks will give you at least 8 different values for each. One scholarly guesstimate figures that the stone used to measure a talent weighed around 34 kg (or as George Washington would put it: 75 lbs). It took a whole lot of silver to balance that weight. In comparison, the shekel weighed around .31 ounces. So, according to one calculation, a single talent of gold in today's market would be worth \$2,163,285; two talents of gold would be \$4,326,569; five talents of gold would be \$10,816,422. Thus, if you were to call me a no talent son of a gun, technically, you'd be right, 200% right. And given that 719 million people across the globe live on less than \$2.15 a day, what Jesus is saying is

that the banker in our text today was entrusting his servants with a tanker load of cheddar — “to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away.”

So, given that Jesus is here alluding to the time between his departure and return, between his ascension and the consummation of Christ’s kingdom, the focus of the text sharpens into the question of what you are going to do with the whole wondrous gift of life entrusted to you in the precious time you have left, for the clock is ticking. *The Confession of 1967* states that, “Life is a gift to be received with gratitude and a task to be pursued with courage.” What will you do with that which you’ve been entrusted in the precious and precarious days, weeks, years, or decades you have left?

Jesus continues the story: “After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them.” The one entrusted with five talents returned with five more; the one entrusted with two came back with two more; and the one entrusted with a single talent went and opened a no-interest savings account at the First Bank of Shovel and Dirt. The only return on his investment were the blisters on his sod-shoveling hands.

Oscar Wilde said that a cynic is a person who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing. I find it interesting that given the S&P average on the investments of the first two Wall Street wizards, Jesus doesn't mention anything about their investment strategies. Jesus isn't telling the story with a flatscreen playing CNBC in the background. There's no talk of stocks vs. bonds, and certainly no mention of cryptocurrencies. Rather Jesus has the banker saying, "Good job! Let's do lunch, so we can plan what we're going to do together." It's not about personal profit so much as it is about trust and about joy and about sharing and investing in the adventure that is life together. "You have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master."

The joy of your master. Have you ever had someone who cares deeply about you show up to bust you out of a funk. "Come on, let's go on a hike ... to a concert ... sign up to tutor ... go on a mission trip ... train for a 5K ... get together with old friends..." And you're all, "I don't have the energy ... the time ... I'm so busy ... It's cold outside ... you mean, like, be with people?" But they don't give up so easily. "Listen, I know you. You'll complain until we get there, but you'll relish every moment of whatever

“there” is. You need this. You cannot miss this opportunity. God forbid, you might even smile again.”

You grumble, you grouse, but you go, and guess what happens? Life, laughter, love, irresistible, irreplaceable, irreversible grace. You actually shudder at the thought of what you would have missed if you had, in your cynicism with your sack of sorrows, rejected the invitation. Every day you awaken is an invitation to “enter the joy of your master.” But you have to take the risk to open the door and step outside. Jesus stands at the door and knocks, but if you ignore it, assuming it’s just someone else who only wants something from you, you’ll never discover that what Jesus wants from you is actually what Jesus want for you — to live fully, to live generously as he did, to risk love, to have the courage to fail and not give up, to have the audacity to actively and intentionally invest in the welfare of others, to pull others out of the ditch of disillusionment. In short, to have the courage to care.

In contrast to the first two talent scouts, Jesus has the banker targeting and critiquing the investment strategy of the one talent cynic. “I gave you over \$2 million, and you buried it in the backyard beneath your crabgrass lawn.”

“But master, I knew you to be a harsh man...” Don’t you hate that?

Someone claims to know you, claims to have the expertise, the knowledge to characterize you, when it is obvious they do not. “Know me,” you want to shout, “You don’t know anything about me.” But then you think, “Hey, if that’s all you think about me, then, well, go with it. Join the haters out there weeping and gnashing their teeth. There are plenty of folks out there who seem to relish that as a lifestyle. It sure seems to be the trending lifestyle today — call them purposefully miserable. I hear there’s some money to be made that way through podcasts. Welcome to weep and gnash radio. Remember our motto: Life stinks. You stink. And then we die.”

Life is a gift to be received with gratitude and pursued with courage. The courage to care. The courage to live fully and generously. The courage to love and be loved. The scholars may not agree on the precise value of a talent, but they’ll all tell you it’s worth a whole lot. Dare to live and enter into the joy of your master. Amen.