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The Church of the Good Shepherd
The Twenty Fourth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 28
November 19, 2017
Matthew 25:14-30

This fall, my husband Jonathan began teaching in our English for Speakers of Other Languages program here at Good Shepherd. The ESOL program provides adult students with the practical English language they need in their everyday lives, as well as English skills that will help them advance in their education or work. This is a popular and needed program in Fairfax County and this term we are serving 100 students, our largest enrollment yet.

Jonathan loves this work and he is especially qualified to teach in this program, as he himself is an immigrant to the United States. Born and raised in Mexico City, he moved here when he was 14 years old, essentially speaking no English. And yet, for most of his adult life, he has been a professional writer and his grammar and written communication is better than mine. I suspect that much of this is native talent but some of it probably comes from his having to study the formal and informal rules of the language.

These days, you wouldn't necessarily realize that he isn't a native English speaker until it comes to certain little things. One of his English-speaking hiccups is with paper towels. I remember the first time he asked me to hand him a "towel paper." I laughed and said, "Towel paper? You mean paper towel!" I thought that was so silly – towel paper – but then he explained that he always found it confusing that we say "toilet paper" but then say "paper towel". It was the type of language inconsistency that I had not noticed before, much like how we hop on the bus but get in the car. We turn off the lights but put out the candles. We get off the phone but out of a conversation.

It's inconsistencies like these that make learning the language and speaking fluently difficult, but Jonathan says what's really hard to learn are our idioms. Idioms are expressions having a figurative meaning not necessarily derived from the individual words. They require cultural context to understand, and for those outside of our culture they make little sense. Jonathan says that one can study the rules of a language and even the inconsistencies but it is idioms that bewilder most those new to our culture and language, sayings like: spill the beans, hit the books, twist someone's arm, sick as a dog, out of the blue, go cold turkey.

To make matters worse, sometimes we use similar idioms to mean very different things. For example, we speak of *digging a hole for ourselves* as bad but *digging down deep* is admirable. When we dig a hole for ourselves, we are getting ourselves deeper and deeper into trouble, often compounding the original offense by trying to explain or act our way out of it, only making the situation worse in the process. But digging down deep is quite different. This refers to when we are willing to endure the discomfort of a situation and "dig deep" to tap some vital internal resource, like courage. We also use this idiom when we talk about a willingness to uncover deeper meanings, motivations, and values, often at the expense of our dignity, security, or happiness.

I've been thinking about digging and holes (both the unfortunate kind as well as the admirable efforts) because of Jesus' parable that we heard this morning. I wonder about that hole dug by the servant and the effort taken to dig it. I wonder about the state of his heart when he was digging. I wonder how the story might have been different if he were digging down deep to uncover a hidden treasure, rather than digging in order to bury the treasure entrusted to him.

The parable, essentially, is this: Before going away on a journey, a wealthy man distributes his wealth in varying amounts of “talents” to three servants. The first two servants, to whom more money is given, invest the money in high-risk ventures and double the value of their talents. When their master returns, he is very pleased and they are rewarded handsomely. The third servant, however, takes a very different approach with the one talent entrusted to him. Instead of taking risks with investments, he digs a hole in the ground and puts all the money in the hole for safekeeping. He is not a bad man – he is prudent, careful, and cautious. He’s not about to take chances with the money – it’s all there, every penny of it, when the master returns. And for his efforts, he receives judgment and punishment.

When you hear this parable, I suspect you might imagine a man dropping few silver dollars in a small hole dug at the base of a tree. But Jesus isn’t talking about a few coins...he’s talking about a fortune. In Jesus’ time, a Roman talent was the heaviest unit of measurement for weight, equal to about 75 pounds. So, in this case, a talent-weight of silver, would not only equal about 75 pounds but also about 15 years wages, and a talent of gold would be worth even more than that. Either one is far, far more money than any servant would ever hope to accumulate. Not only is this a huge fortune, it would also require a very big hole, demanding substantial effort to excavate a hole deep enough to keep it safe. And yet, he is not rewarded for his caution – indeed, by ensuring the security of the gift entrusted him, he ironically loses everything.

I feel for that servant. I can only imagine the fear he must have felt: fear of losing the unasked for and unearned fortune; fear of what may come of him when it is time for the accounting; fear that he isn’t smart enough or responsible enough to manage this outrageous amount of money. The fear of messing up, for he can never, ever repay this wealth should he make the wrong choices. It is only fear that would be sufficient motivation to dig a hole big enough to contain and conceal all of this. He must have been terrified. No wonder he almost sounds relieved to give it back to the master: “Oh! Thank heavens you’ve returned. Here, take it all back.”

This parable of the talents is frequently taught as a lesson to the followers of Christ to discover their gifts and abilities and to use them generously to the glory of God and in service of the kingdom. And while this is true and worthy, there is also more to this parable. The parable of the talents reveals the outrageous generosity of God. It reveals a master who entrusts extraordinary wealth and responsibility upon his servants – more than a life-time’s wages. These gifts also came with great freedom. The master doesn’t tell them what to do with the fortune, instead he gives and then goes away, providing the distance and freedom for them to grow, lead, take chances, and flourish.

This parable also reveals the role of fear in preventing us from living the lives God intends for us. It suggests that the master gives the fortunes with the intention that they invest in risky ventures, because the only way to double one’s investment capital is to toss aside all security and risk losing it all. It is these servants, the ones who invested recklessly and fearlessly who are rewarded. The third servant, however, takes no action – he does not risk even the safest of investment opportunities by depositing it in the bank. Fear of judgment, fear of failure, fear of disgrace, it is fear that drives him to expend all his energy and effort instead in digging that hole. His investment of effort in digging, however, brings no return at all, and instead of ensuring against failure and loss, his efforts cause him to miss out entirely.

About this parable, writer and pastor John Buchanan writes that, “The greatest risk of all, it turns out, is not to risk anything, not to care deeply and passionately enough about anything to invest deeply, to give your heart away and in the process risk everything. The greatest risk of all,

it turns out, is to play it safe, to live cautiously and prudently.” To do so earns this servant punishment because, burying the talent rather than putting it to work in the world is tantamount to putting one’s lamp under a bushel basket: smothering not only own light but also casts the whole house into darkness.

We, like these servants, are to invest the abundance of gifts given us with abandon. We should be like the farmer in the Parable of the Sower that Jesus taught earlier in Matthew’s gospel. The one who sows the seeds of the kingdom everywhere, with great reckless abundance. He did not measure and mete out his seed. Instead he cast seed not only upon good soil meant to receive seed, but also on outlying and inhospitable places – on good soil as well as thin, rocky, and thorny. What mattered was the abundance of the sowing and the grain brought forth, not the quality of the soil nor how much seed was lost.

God calls each one of us to bold, courageous, and faithful action. God entrusts each of us with gifts greater than we deserve and far more than we could ever repay. God pours out his grace upon us in outrageous abundance, and calls us to live boldly, bearing God’s image in the world by our own outrageous generosity of love, risking it all to sow the seeds of the kingdom of heaven. So often we think of our faith and our religion as something meant to give us comfort and security. Faith, many of us think, is about personal security here and in the hereafter. But this is not the faith that God calls us to in following his Son Jesus. The way of Christ is the way of absolute risk – the way of the cross. We, in fact, are called to lose it all – to lose our lives for Christ’s sake – and yet, in doing so, we are promised the living waters of everlasting life.

Jesus invites us to be his disciples, to live our lives as fully as possible by investing them and risking them, by expanding the horizons on what we think possible. To follow Christ, to believe in him, is not so much to believe certain things about him, rather it is to live a life that resembles and re-member him. A life in which we live fully, love deeply, care passionately, and give our hearts away, and in the process risk everything.

Amen .