

RISKY FAITH

Psalm 90: 1-12
Matthew 25: 14-30

Faith Community
November 17, 2002

Introduction

Millard Fuller was a successful attorney. He had done so well that he was a millionaire with a thriving practice and a horrendously busy schedule. He worked long hours and had a great deal of power.

One day he came home late from work and his wife told him she wanted a divorce. He was absolutely stunned. He had been so wrapped up in work that he hadn't even seen it coming.

He took time off work, and he and his wife, Linda, went to a place called the Koininia Farm outside of Americus Georgia. There they worked the farm, talked with each other, had regularly led Bible studies, and worked on their marriage.

As their marriage began to heal they were both struck with Jesus' words, "Go and give all you have to the poor, and come follow me." They decided that was what they needed to do. They ended up giving their money away and creating an organization known as Habitat for Humanity. They set out to build affordable homes for people in need all around the world.

They knew it was an enormous challenge, but they knew it was important work to do, and in line with what God was calling them to do in their lives. By now Habitat for Humanity has built tens of thousands of homes in this country and around the world. The Fullers have not been afraid to risk, they have been creative in their faithfulness, and produced amazing results for people in need.

I

Jesus tells this story of a wealthy man who goes on an extended trip. Before he goes he calls his servants and entrusts his money to them. To the first he gives one and a quarter million dollars, to the second he gives a half million dollars, to third gives a quarter million dollars. (As you know, he gives them five, two, and one talents. A talent is worth more than fifteen years salary for a laborer. By today's standards of about eight dollars an hour, one talent would be worth about a quarter million.)

Then the rich man leaves for his trip.

The servant who got one and a quarter million traded with it and made that much more. The one who got a half million also traded with it and made another half million. The servant who got quarter million dug a hole in the ground and buried it. In burying the money he wasn't being irresponsible, he was protecting this money in the accepted way. Since he couldn't take the money to the First National Bank of Palestine, the safest thing to do was to bury it.

The master returns. He calls in his servants to see what they have done with his money. The first comes and tells him he has doubled the one and a quarter million dollars to two and a half million dollars. The master says, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave, you have been trustworthy with a few things. I will put you in charge of many things. Enter the joy of your master."

The second servant comes and shows the master the half million he has made from the quarter million he has been given. The master says the same to him.

Then the third servant comes forward. "I knew you were a harsh and ruthless man. You harvest from places you haven't planted. I was afraid and hid your talent. Here is what is yours."

The master is outraged, "You evil and lazy servant, you knew that I reap where I haven't sown. You should have at least invested my money and gotten interest on it!" The master took the money from the man with one talent and gave it to the servant who had ten. Then he threw the man out of the house.

II

The center of this parable is the one talent man. He is afraid. He hides the money in the ground. He plays it safe. It's not that he was irresponsible, just the opposite, he was the most responsible of them all. Knowing his master to be harsh and ruthless, he carefully protects the money so he won't lose even one denarius. He was afraid of his master and so he acted cautiously.

One of the most frequent phrases Jesus used in his ministry was, "Don't be afraid." When the New Testament was being written down, the early Christians were hiding from the Roman government. Some were hunted down and fed to the lions. Some were put in prison. Almost everyone had to worship in secret, in the catacombs underground. In this situation they wrote down Jesus' words, "Don't be afraid." Jesus says that to us today. Don't be afraid to get involved, to go into the ghetto, to let go. Don't be afraid of the person who looks different, or doesn't follow everyone else.

The one talent man is afraid to risk and therefore loses everything. Directly Jesus says to us, "Don't be afraid to reach out to the one others reject; don't be afraid to give your money away; to take daring action." For some of us it is, "Don't be afraid to take a stand or to be laughed at." God is with you; don't be afraid.

III

In this parable Jesus encourages creative action. The first two servants who were given money went off and traded with it. They weren't afraid to take that amount of money and try to make more with it. They didn't just get a little interest; they got 100% return! They found some creative financing that really paid off. The master didn't tell any of them what they should do with the money, he just entrusted it to them. The first and second found creative ways to increase their masters money.

They weren't just dutifully following directions; they were imaginative. They took initiative and thought of what they could do for their boss.

For you and me it isn't just, "Do you follow all the rules?" But, do you have initiative? Are you creative for Christ? Millard Fuller not only wasn't afraid to give his money away and take a risk, he was creative in developing Habitat for Humanity. He looked at what serious needs there were in the world, and asked himself what God might be calling him to do. We can't all do that - we're not expected to - but we need to ask ourselves what small or great thing God might be calling us to do, where we live. Jesus asks for creativity from us.

IV

The slaves who invested the money wanted to be productive for their master. All three could have buried the money. They all could have had the attitude, "I may not make anything for you, but at least I won't lose any. Your money is safe with me." The servants with two and five talents wanted to create more for their Lord. They asked, "How can we produce the most for our master?"

The parable says to us that it's not enough to play it safe, to follow the rules, to obey directions...rather, produce something for God...for other people.

It's not enough to sit at home, content that we've followed all the commandments, and our hands are clean. Better to get our hands dirty and have done something productive for Christ.

Conclusion

Jesus story was told to help us in our faith. This parable talks about not being afraid to risk for your faith, being creative in your response to God, and looking at how we can be productive for God.

I was able to see the last part of the special on PBS about Jimmy Carter. It occurred to me that here is a man who took a devastating loss in the election for president and turned it into something good and helpful. I can imagine the depression, defeat, and heartache that must have followed Carter's defeat in the election. He would have to be devastated.

But within months of that defeat he said that he hoped to be able to do something even more important. I remember hearing that comment and thinking, "What could you do that would be more important than being president?" Carter took that agony of defeat and turned it into something beautiful for God. He wasn't afraid to risk, he was creative in using the skills God has given him, and he certainly has been productive in ending disease and bringing peace to the world. This ex-president has now won the Nobel Peace Prize.

You and I may not be able to do what Millard Fuller or Jimmy Carter has done, but in our own world, with our own skills, we can make a difference.

Amen