

Playing It Safe

The Rev. Dr. Peter G.
James

Matthew 25:14-30

Sermon Series:
iReady?

*Parables tell
all the truth
and tell it
slant.*

When I read this parable, the words of Emily Dickinson's provocative poem come to mind, *Tell All the Truth and Tell it Slant*. Telling it straight doesn't always achieve its desired affect. Sometimes it's better to tell it slant.

Mind you, Dickinson is a strong proponent of telling the truth. But sometimes she recognizes that it's better to tell the truth slant. Indirection is necessary at times. As she writes in her poem, "The truth must dazzle gradually."

Jesus sometimes tells it straight in his ministry. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the gospel" (Mark 1:15). But the direct approach doesn't always penetrate people's hard hearts. That's why Jesus resorts to telling the gospel slant. It's the only way Jesus can slip by their carefully constructed defenses. Sometimes, indirection is the only way forward.

Let me illustrate with a sports analogy. (I know, why are you not surprised?) Jesus' listeners expect him to throw a fastball. But, if you were Jesus and you knew your listeners were expecting a fastball, would you throw them a heater? I don't think so, not if you had a curve ball in your repertoire. You would throw them a curve ball.

When a curve leaves a pitcher's hand, it looks like it will be out of the strike zone. So the batter lays off the pitch, thinking that it will be wide of the plate. But a good curve ball breaks back over the plate and catches the hitter off guard. Jesus' parables are like that. They catch his hearers off guard.

Jesus is a master storyteller. We call his stories parables or parabola in the Greek, meaning to throw alongside something else. Jesus places these parables alongside his teaching to illustrate his point.

Parables tell all the truth and tell it slant. *Tell it Slant* is also the title of a thoughtful new book by one of my favorite authors, Eugene Peterson. Peterson ought to know something about interpreting the Bible since he invested 10 years in translating it into modern English. You may have seen his translation or have read from it. It's called *The Message*.

Parables draw Jesus' unsuspecting listeners into the story. These stories stir people's imaginations and tease their minds into active thought. Parables dazzle Jesus' listeners gradually.

Jesus uses the stuff of everyday life to frame his parables. The kingdom of God is like a farmer sowing seed or a father with two sons or a bride and groom at a wedding banquet.

***...parables are
real brain
teasers.***

On the surface, these parables appear as simple stories. But don't be fooled. These parables operate as real brain teasers.

Jesus uses the element of surprise to good affect in the Parable of the Talents. The master in our story gives talents to his servants to use while he is away on a journey. The first two servants double their investments and are handsomely rewarded. And you're thinking, so far, so good. Everything in the story is unfolding as expected.

But when we come to this third servant, everything is turned upside down. The master takes the talent from the one-talent man and gives it to the newly minted ten-talent man, who already has more than he knows what to do with. The parable ends with this third servant being cast into utter darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Now, you're thinking, what's up with that?

The finale of this parable reads like an inverted Robin Hood tale. You may remember the legend of Robin Hood, who stole from the rich to give to the poor. Jesus seems to advocate here robbing from the poor to reward the rich. Zeroing out the talent of this one-talent man strikes me as overkill. Is this the kind of God we worship? As I said, parables are real brain teasers.

To solve this riddle, I invite you to walk back through this parable with me. The master, in verse 14, is about to embark on a journey. We're told in verse 19 that this journey will keep him

away a long time. Circle the word "long." Jesus has been speaking, in Matthew 24-25, about his return after his imminent departure. His return may seem like an interminable delay to his disciples. Last Sunday, we looked at the parable of a bridegroom who was similarly delayed (25:5). Jesus, like the groom in this parable, will come. It may seem as if he will be delayed. But, get ready, he's coming.

The master gives five talents to one servant, two talents to a second servant and one talent to a third servant. This master has sense enough to realize that his servants have varying degrees of ability. So, he gives them talents consistent with their abilities.

Our English word talent originates from this parable and has come to represent our natural abilities. I've heard plenty of sappy sermons based on this parable. I've probably preached them myself. You know, use your talents to the best of your ability. There is merit in seeing talents this way, but let's stick to the parable for a moment. A talent represents the largest amount of money in Jesus' day. A talent would equate to three years worth of wages for the average worker. So, five talents would represent an enormous amount of money; equivalent to 15 years worth of wages.

It's obvious Jesus is utilizing hyperbole to make his point. He wants to show the generosity of this master toward his servants. Even the one-talent man receives a generous amount of money to work with.

When the master returns from his long journey, he settles accounts

***Some people
imagine God
to be a cosmic
bookkeeper....***

with his servants. The first two servants report an incredible return on investment—five on top of five and two on top of two. “Well done, good and faithful servants,” the master says. “You have been trustworthy in a few things. I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master” (25:20-23).

But it’s a far different scenario for the third servant who hides his master’s income in the ground. The rationale this servant gives for his do-nothing strategy is rather curious—“I knew you to be a harsh man” (25:24). I don’t read anything about a harsh man. Everything attests to the contrary, to his master’s generosity.

Notice what the servant says next. “I was afraid, so I hid my talent in the ground” (25:25). Now, we’re getting somewhere. This servant decides to bury his talent based on some imaginary fear.

The master’s relationship with each servant is based on trust. We’re told at the outset that the master “entrusts his property to them” (25:14). He enters into a fiduciary relationship with each servant. He never instructs them to make money for him; his only expectation is that they will do business for him. While the master epitomizes generosity, this third servant displays an excess of caution.

“If you knew me to be a harsh man,” the master says, “you could have invested my money with the bankers” (25:27). At the very least, you could have opened an interest bearing savings account,

yielding two-and-a-quarter percent, insured by the FDIC. But no, you decided to play it safe based on some imaginary fear.

Relationships based on fear tend to utilize appeasement strategies. What can I do to get on this person’s good side?

Some people imagine God to be a cosmic bookkeeper, who is solely interested in results. Is God only interested in the bottom line? Does God really keep score, placing a check against every good work we do and recording a black mark against every bad deed we commit? If good deeds outweigh the bad, we pass go and enter into God’s eternal reward. But if bad deeds outweigh the good, we don’t survive the final cut and suffer the consequences.

But God is not a divine bookkeeper. In fact, the only bookkeeping done in this parable happens to be by this third servant, who decided he had to fear a non-existent audit and so must hide his talent in the ground.

God, like the master in the parable, is exceedingly generous. God lavishes talents on his people—five talents, two talents and one talent. But even one talent is extravagant. God is not prudent or restrained in showing grace to us. God is exceedingly generous. This parable about judgment is also a lesson in God’s extravagance.

What really galls the master in the parable is how this third servant regards him—as someone who must be feared. What do you mean, I can’t be trusted. What do you call three years worth of wages?

“If you had your life to live over again, what would you do differently?”

So what? So what difference does this parable make in my life.

Being over cautious is a terrible way to live. The servant who is called on a carpet in our parable is precisely the one who wouldn't even try.

If God is not prudent or restrained in the talents he gives us, neither should we become prudent or wary in our serving. Sometimes, like this third servant, we manage our discipleship like we do our investment portfolios. We diversify in order to spread the risk around.

This parable argues against playing it safe in our Christian service. Jesus warns us against burying our talents in the ground. He summons us to invest our talents in the kingdom of God.

Churches, like people, can play it safe. We can become overly cautious, afraid to step out in faith. When teams play it safe, more often than not, they lose.

I came across a survey recently conducted among a group of people 95 and older. These 50 centenarians, or nearly so, were asked, “If you had your life to live over again, what would you do differently?” These most senior of citizens said three things. First, they would invest in things that would outlast them. They wanted their impact to live on after they died. Second, they wished they had given more time to ponder carefully thought-out priorities for their lives. And third, they wanted to risk more, to take more chances. They regretted playing it safe and

not venturing outside their comfort zones.

When I come to the end of my life and if God asks me, “How did you live your life?”, I hope and pray that I will be will able to say more than “I played it safe.”

Don't play it safe. Invest in God's kingdom with the talents God has given you. Play the hand you're dealt with for all its worth.

Prayer:

O Lord, you have been exceedingly generous with us. Your love is simply extravagant. You have lavished grace upon us, measure upon measure.

As we have opportunity today to reflect on the true meaning of Christmas, fill our hearts with new resolve to love and serve you. Guide us to live for things that truly matter. We pray for the courage not to play it safe, but to take risks for you and invest your talents in kingdom building. We offer this prayer in the name of Jesus our Emmanuel, Amen.

