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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA  
November 15, 2020  
Year A, Proper 28, Revised Common Lectionary  
[Zephaniah 1:7,12-18](#)  
[Psalm 90:1-8, \(9-11\), 12](#)  
[1 Thessalonians 5:1-11](#)  
[Matthew 25:14-30](#)

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Have you ever found yourself frozen by the fear of failure?

Ever found yourself so afraid of losing that you didn't want to even step out on the playing field?

When I was about fourteen years old, I had a crush on a girl I'll call Deborah. We were friends, and would sometimes talk on the phone in the evenings—this was just twenty years ago, before texting, when teenagers still talked on the phone—and every time I went to call her, the anxiety set in. I would sit there, looking at the phone, the seconds and minutes ticking by. Sometimes I'd pick up the phone and my finger would go to the keypad, only to quickly set down the handset before I'd finished dialing. Eventually, finally, I'd pluck up the courage to call her. And we'd talk for a while, me always trying to gauge how things were going, but never quite having the courage to tell her about my crush.

Now it turned out that Deborah didn't actually like me back in that way. We stayed just friends, and I survived, and went on to other crushes and other relationships. But what I remember is those endless minutes with my finger poised above the keypad, agonizing, unable to act because I was too afraid of what might or might not happen if I did.

So often, the fear of failure is worse than the failure itself. Failure happens, and we go on. But fear keeps us stuck. Fear keeps us frozen.

Today we heard a parable about three servants. And on its face it's a fairly unsatisfying story. Two servants play the market and make a bundle, and get rewarded. A third one plays it safe and gets punished. As a literal story, it seems like the opposite of good news. Jesus goes as far as to say, "To those who have, more will be given, but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away"—which is essentially "The rich get richer and the poor get poorer." Well, we didn't need Jesus to tell us that! And it doesn't sound much like what we'd expect from Jesus who said he came to preach "good news to the poor."

But of course a parable is always about more than it seems. Today I want to suggest that we hear this parable not as being about success, but about faith. Not about working hard and getting rewarded, but about trusting a God who's generous and loving whether we succeed or fail.

Think about how the master acts in this story. First of all, he puts enormous sums of money into his servants' care.. A talent in the ancient world would be worth something like several hundred thousand dollars today—so even the servant who only gets one is holding a huge amount. And then he goes away without so much as giving instructions about what they should do with it.

Two of the servants accept the faith he puts in them, and they show faith in return. They take a risk, and their risk pays off. One commentator has pointed out that the fact that each of them exactly doubles his money suggests that the growth is in a sense automatic—it happens the same way that seeds bear fruit in some of Jesus' other parables. It doesn't depend on their skills or efforts, just on their willingness to trust.<sup>1</sup>

But the third servant is different: instead of acting out of faith, he acts out of fear. Or rather, his fear makes him choose not to act at all. By burying his money in the ground, he avoids the possibility of loss by foreclosing on the possibility of gain. He doesn't accept the faith the master has put in him—and he has no faith in the master. His image of God is a harsh, cruel one: "I know you are a harsh man ... so I was afraid, and I went and hid your money in the ground." In the end he creates a self-fulfilling prophecy for himself.

We aren't told what the master would have done if any of the servants had ended up *losing* their money. But I'd like to think he would have been fine with that. After all, he says he would have accepted even the smallest amount of interest. It doesn't seem that he's invested in the outcome so much as in the servants' willingness to try, to step forward in faith in response to the faith he's placed in them.

When he congratulates the first two servants, our translation has the master say, "Well done, good and *trustworthy* slave." A more familiar translation is "good and faithful"—and that's actually a better translation of the word here. Because like the English word "faithful," the Greek word *pistos* can have two senses. It can mean *trustworthy*, but it can also mean *trusting*. The master congratulates the first two servants, I think, not for being *worthy* of faith, but for *having* faith—being faith-full, full of faith. Whether they win or lose, they have enough trust in the master to risk it all.

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<sup>1</sup> From a 2014 sermon by Charles Hoffacker, <http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/stw/2014/10/22/23-pentecost-proper-28-a-2014/>

It may have been Mother Teresa who said, “God calls us not to be successful, but to be faithful.” Like the servants, God has given us an incredible, lavish gift: the gift of new life in Jesus Christ. We didn’t do anything to earn or deserve it. And all God asks is that we not hoard that gift for ourselves, but share it with the world. It’s not up to us to multiply it—God can take care of that. All we’re called to do is live boldly and truthfully, not hiding our light under a bushel or hiding our money in the ground. What we’re called to do, in short, is to love. And as anyone who’s ever had a child, or a partner, or a friend, knows, you can’t love and play it safe.

You can’t truly love someone without risking getting hurt. But the real disaster isn’t getting hurt, but failing to love at all.

Jesus didn’t play it safe when he came to live as one of us. He trusted God and gave everything away: power, glory, status, and in the end, even his life itself. And God repaid that trust, so that not only does Jesus live again, his life has been multiplied thousands and millions of times over. That life flowed into you and me when we were baptized into Jesus’ body. And it flows out through us every time we step out to follow him.

How will that life flow out through you today? How will you follow Jesus by living boldly, taking a risk, and sharing what God has given you with the world?