

The Sin of Doing Nothing

The Rev. Dr. David A. Van Dyke
The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
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I don't know about you, but references to weeping and gnashing of teeth have a way of getting my attention. And a good parable will always get your attention because it jolts you out of conventional ways of thinking and forces you to consider alternatives you've never before considered. I think this parable does just that.

Let's acknowledge at the outset that the master's response to the third servant seems unnecessarily harsh. Unlike the other two who used what the master had entrusted to them to make more for their master, this fellow simply went out, dug a hole and buried what he'd been given. It's not like it's a scandal, really.

The servant in question didn't necessarily do anything wrong, unless he did. Unless he did something reprehensible in the eyes of the master. In this parable the master praised the risk takers—the ones who made something happen with what he'd entrusted to their care. The harsh condemnation is directed toward the one who took the easy way out and did nothing.

The master seems to be suggesting,

Even if you weren't going to make something significant happen with what I gave you, even if you weren't going to invest heavily in Nvidia stock or Amazon stock, or make a FANG play, or even if you weren't going to go to the Ho Chunk Casino and try to double the money quickly, you could have at least stuck it safely in a CD at the bank and gotten a little bit of a return. Couldn't you have at least done that much?

The master is not pleased with the man's effort, or lack thereof. He has the lone talent snatched away from him and then has the man thrown into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

I'm thinking that this might be a good time for us all to take a moment right now, and pull out our pledge cards and scratch out the amounts we have written down on them and come up with new amounts! Well, as tempting as that may be for me and for the Stewardship Committee, let's begin by understanding why what this man did infuriated the master so.

First off, at the very outset of the parable it is made clear that each of these servants was given a number of talents according to their ability to handle what was given to them. In other words, the master's expectations of them were not unreasonable, demanding or unfair. The fact that the other two made good with what they were given demonstrates that.

Not only does our guy do nothing with what's been given to him, he turns around and blames the master for his own sloth. "I was afraid because you are harsh and mean spirited, and also a bit of a thief, I might add, reaping where you did not sow..." What a cheap shot. What a pathetic attempt at victimization. He's merely a victim of his own laziness. We've all encountered people like that, haven't we?

Sometimes people really are paralyzed by their fear, but sometimes they are downright lazy and self-centered—they feel too put upon to bother doing anything for anyone else. It isn't that they can't, they simply choose not to. Or they reach for the nearest excuse when asked to give of themselves. The lazy servant in this parable reminds me of the pathetic guy about whom someone said, "He aspired to mediocrity and only occasionally achieved it."

As angry as the master was by his inaction, I get the feeling the master would have been understanding had the man at least tried and failed. Has he given it his all. I get the feeling that what matters to the master in this parable, and therefore to God since all parables are really about God, is for people who have been entrusted with much, even if you don't think it's very much, at least compared to some others, is for each of us to assume some responsibility for our lives and our decisions—to step out in faith and to be good stewards of what God has entrusted to us.

At the end of my tenth-grade year, a teacher I liked very much, and who I assumed liked me, despite my frequently disruptive presence in his class, albeit humorous to my classmates, wrote something in my yearbook that I haven't forgotten. He wrote, "David, Those who do only enough to get by, get only what's left." When I read his comments I was stunned. It felt like a rebuke and I thought he liked me.

During high school I did not take academics seriously. For me, school was all about fun. It was about getting by without doing very much, relying instead on humor and personality. It had worked beautifully in junior high.

So I have never forgotten what that teacher wrote and in fact, have come to realize that it was perhaps because he did like me that he wrote what he did—that he called me out. I'm convinced that when he looked out over that classroom, he didn't see me the way other kids in tenth grade saw me, as a cutup. He saw a boy who had potential he was not living up to—a boy who was squandering an opportunity to learn.

It seems as if Jesus saves his harshest condemnation not for the weak and the vulnerable, not for the broken and weary, not even for those who have committed moral lapses in judgment, but for the proud and the pious, the hypocrites who profess one thing and then do another. It's for the ones who are about appearances only while completely lacking in substance and follow through when it comes to their decisions and actions.

Ultimately what this parable is about, what the Christian life is about, is stewardship. It's about what we do with what we have, what we have been given, which is not limited to, but certainly does include our money. God's expectations are that we will be faithful with what God has entrusted to our care and nurture.

Our time and talents, our money and our lives.

That's both a blessing and a tremendous responsibility, especially for those of us who have a great deal, which includes each of us fortunate to live in the richest country in the world. And let's face it, God has some very real and reasonable expectations of us. The Gospel of Luke puts it this way, "To whom much is given much is required" (12:48).

I wonder if Jesus didn't tell this parable to warn his followers that God doesn't honor complacency. God is not a fan of timid, safe living that always calculates the cost before acting. This parable suggests that God is much more pleased by those who take risks, who stick their necks out for things that matter. For those who run the risk of rejection because they are doing the right thing—those who are not afraid to sacrifice.

For those who actually find their life by first losing it.

The good news here is that God has entrusted each of us with certain gifts and talents. Each of us has been given a special song to sing and a rare and unique ability to make a difference in the world and to touch the life of another. Many of you make a significant difference by giving generously from the financial resources God has entrusted to your care. Many of you also make tremendous contributions through service and volunteering, by lending a helping hand and a listening ear, as well as in ways you may never know.

According to this parable, what people are given is apparently what they can handle, which eliminates the excuse that unless you can save the world it's a waste of time to do anything. Unless you can fund a significant portion of the budget it's not worth doing anything. Sadly, that's what the third servant thought.

So let me ask you, what are you doing with what has been entrusted to you? How are you using your God-given gifts? How are you spending you time, your talents and your money?

And while I'm at it, how are you planning to spend the rest of your life?

Amen.