

Twenty-Fourth Sunday After Pentecost
Matt. 25:14-30

Risks of Faith*

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Is it possible to make anyone fall in love with you? Do love potions really exist? Two decades ago, a psychology professor named Arthur Aron created an exercise designed to help two strangers fall in love with each other. It's a simple exercise, consisting of 36 questions, in which one individual shares his or her answers with the other, alternating back and forth.

There is anecdotal evidence that this exercise actually works. In 2015, a writing teacher, Mandy Len Catron, created quite a stir when she published a piece in the *New York Times* entitled "To Fall in Love with Anyone, Do This." The article described her own experience with the 36 questions and how she actually ended up falling in love with an acquaintance with whom she did the exercise.

Lest you think this is a modern-day version of witchcraft, let me explain the secret behind the exercise. It's pretty simple. The exercise requires each individual to take increasing risks in terms of disclosing something about himself or herself to the other.

The first question is relatively innocuous. "Given the choice of anyone in the world, [who] would you want as a dinner guest?" Not so bad. But then the questions become a bit harder. The fourteenth question is: "Is there something that you've dreamed of doing for a long time? Why haven't you done it?"

By the time you get to the end of the questions, they can be downright challenging in terms of baring one's soul. One of the final questions is: "If you were to die this evening with no opportunity to communicate with anyone, what would you most regret not having told someone? Why haven't you told them yet?"

The 36 questions work because they ask each participant to take increasing risks with the other in terms of intimacy. They are asked to share things that they normally would not share with a stranger – or perhaps even a close friend or family member. By taking the risk of putting themselves "out there," the participants actually open themselves up to the possibility of finding love.

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Today's gospel passage from Matthew is about taking risks. A master goes off on a journey, and he entrusts three of his slaves with money. To the first, he gives five talents. To the second, he gives two talents. And to the third, he gives one talent.

Now to really understand this passage, you have to understand that a talent is a huge amount of money. In Jesus' time, a single talent equaled approximately 16 years worth of work. So to give someone five talents is to entrust him or her with an amount equal to eighty years worth of work – more than what can be earned in a single lifetime!

The slave with the five talents goes off and makes another five talents through financial trading. For his efforts, he is praised by the master and is given even more responsibilities. "Well done, good and trustworthy slave," the master says. The slave with the two talents does the same thing. He, too, is praised by the master.

But the slave with the one talent is afraid of the master. Instead of investing the talent, he digs a hole and hides it in the ground, for fear of losing the money. When the master returns, the slave returns the one talent, confessing that he is afraid because the master is a "harsh man."

The master rebukes the slave as "wicked and lazy," and he hands over the one talent to the slave with the ten talents. The master says: "[T]o all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away." And so he sends the slave to the "outer darkness," where there is "weeping and gnashing of teeth."

I don't know about you, but my initial reaction to this passage was that it is a pretty terrible story. In general, I'm a fairly risk-averse person. I've never sat at a casino blackjack table. Nor have I ever engaged in day trading or playing the stock market. In many ways, I can identify with the slave with the one talent. I'd rather be certain that I keep a large sum of money than risk losing it.

So why does the master treat the third slave so harshly? Why does the master take away the one talent and give it to the slave who already has ten talents? And why does the master send the slave to the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth? Is this the kind of God we would worship, let alone entrust our lives to?

The answer, I believe, has to do with taking risks. There is a saying in the financial world of "no risk, no reward." That is, unless you take a risk, you will never receive a return. For example, if you are saving for retirement, it may seem like the safest thing to do is to hide your money in a mattress. But if you do that, you actually run the risk of inflation eating away at the value of your assets. And, ultimately, you run the risk of outliving your assets. (Some of you know that I'm a pension lawyer by training, and so I could go on forever about this stuff. But I digress.)

Risk is at the heart of what Jesus is talking about in today's gospel passage. To follow Christ – that is, to live your life as a Christian – is about taking risks. It is not

enough to bury your talents in the ground, or to hide your light under a bushel. And, here, I am not talking about talents as large sums of money, but rather as the God-given gifts with which each of us has been entrusted in our lives.

Few of us are called to vocations that rival those of the heroes of the faith such as Mary Magdalene, Simon Peter, Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day, or others. But that's not the point. The point is that each and every one of us has received talents from God – whether one, two, five, or a thousand – and each of us has a responsibility to take a risk of faith with those talents.

What if we understood today's gospel passage not so much as speaking about gifts of money, but rather about gifts of love? What if a talent represented the amount of love that we've received from God and from others? As recipients of that love, it is never enough to hoard it or to bury it in the depths of our hearts. Rather, we are called to take that love and invest it back into the world so that we can double it – or more.

Recall the exercise of the 36 questions for falling in love. The point of the exercise is that you cannot find love unless you are willing to take a risk. It is only when you are ready to risk vulnerability – and to share the matters of your heart with others – that you will find love in return.

C.S. Lewis has written powerfully about taking the risk of love. In his wonderful book, *The Four Loves*, he writes:

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal [L]ock [your heart] up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness.

But in that casket – safe, dark, motionless, airless – [your heart] will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable The only place outside [of] Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers . . . of love is Hell.

This helps me to understand why the slave who buried his one talent ends up in the outer darkness. Because of fear, he refuses to share his talents with the world. And because of this, he ends up – as C.S. Lewis writes – with a heart that is “unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable.” A hell of one's own creating, if you will.

What Jesus is asking us to do in today's gospel is more complicated than just answering 36 questions or drinking a love potion. Jesus challenges us to take a risk for the Kingdom of God. That takes discernment. That takes faith. And, most of all, that takes courage.

What will you do with your talents? Will you bury them? Or will you take a risk – and share your gifts and your love with the world?