

Is Failure an Option?

Matthew 25: 14-30

"Houston, we've got a problem." These famous words were spoken by astronaut Jim Lovell on the ill-fated Apollo 13 voyage to the moon. In response, with the mission plan scrapped and improvisation the name of the new game, mission control director Gene Kranz spoke another now famous phrase, "Failure is not an option," In that situation, failure to meet the challenge, failure to be creative under pressure, meant that people would die.

The parable of the talents (Matthew 25: 14-30) is a story about success and failure from Jesus' perspective. This week's "Ask Jack" question is this: "In the parable of the talents, who do the three people represent? What about the one who is afraid and hides his talent -- who is considered a failure, because I see myself much like him?" Initially, what feelings do you have in response to this parable? A lot of people feel it's unfair. Do you find yourself wanting to justify the action, or perhaps inaction, of the one-talent servant? Do you want to defend him as a victim of an unjust system? Many people do and see him as having less to work with than the others? What about compassion? What about grace?

In some ways, this story just doesn't seem like Jesus. There is the harsh response of the master and what feels in many ways like unjust treatment for the servant for his failure. Is God like that -- condemning us if we don't succeed, if we don't do enough with our lives? Do you want to serve a God like that?

By way of background information, it is unlikely that this parable was told by Jesus in the form we now have it. The Matthew version is just too long and involved. It's almost a sermon! Jesus was an itinerate rabbi. His teaching style would have included short, pithy, sayings and brief parables that would have been daringly counterintuitive. It seems probable that the kernel of the parable of the talents goes back to Jesus. That kernel would have involved two servants who succeeded incredibly well and were rewarded extravagantly while one servant failed utterly and was punished excessively.

The parable's meaning cannot be found in the teller's, or anybody's, explanation, but only as each of us enters the story for ourselves. The meaning of any parable comes as we find ourselves in it. It would have been clear to those who first heard this parable -- at least Matthew's first readers, that this was a story about responsibility, not about salvation. It is about what you do with your life and about how God views success and failure. I suggest this understanding in part because of the placement of the parable in Matthew's Gospel. It is sandwiched between the parable of the wise and foolish maidens waiting for the bridegroom and the marriage feast with the theme of "be prepared," and the familiar parable of the sheep and goats with the theme that Christ identifies with the poor and the powerless.

All three parables in Matthew 25 are about being church and being faithful followers of Jesus. This portion of Matthew's gospel was likely used as a catechism for new converts to Christianity in preparation for their baptism at Easter. The talents represent amounts of money and serve as a symbol for all the resources we have. These include our finances and our health. There are our talents (what we do well), our passions (what we love to do even if not good at doing it), what we're good at even if we don't love it), and our dreams. Altogether, this story is about our lives, what we bring to life's table -- our gifts.

Three people were entrusted with resources from the boss -- different amounts. The one with the most invests every bit of it. He held nothing back and developed even more. This is an example of hyperbole. The first 1st servant received a huge amount, used it perfectly, and ended up with a 100% return. The next servant got half as much though it was still a lot. He likewise invested it perfectly and doubled the original amount for the boss. The third servant got the smallest amount, though that was still plenty, but he failed to invest it at all. He abdicated the responsibility and perhaps even hid from himself. He dug a hole in the ground and kept it out of sight, trying to play it safe by doing nothing. The result was an unhappy boss. As a result of that unhappy boss, there was an unhappy servant who suffered several losses: the original gifts (the one talent), the trust that had been given, and his place in the community of the other servants.

These consequences for the third servant's actions represent for us not punishment from a judgmental God, but the natural result of what we do and don't do in our lives. The third servant lost his way, failed to realize

the potential of his life. We, too, lose our way. We forget our *reason for being* when we fail to invest ourselves, when we fail to realize what we have the potential to be. We lose our way by failing to accept the responsibility that was created in us to live by faith – to be awake to the Spirit. There is much to be gained by investing ourselves fully on the journey of faith.

What is the payoff? It seems that the master didn't intend to take the servants' giftedness back for himself. The reward for responsibility turned out to be more opportunity and more responsibility for the successful servants. They received more of whatever God had given them in the first place. We, too, receive more of what God has given us: more to be invested with the amount tailored to each of us individually and also communally. Our failure to risk investing ourselves brings not direct punishment from God, but the inevitable consequence of a loss of energy and confidence, and an erosion of attitude. Doing nothing seems to be the worst: less than the least and far worse than failing while trying.

The big question is, "Where do you see yourself this parable?" What is its meaning for you?

What is success in this story? It is not about achievement, making money, building a business, saving people, or becoming famous and respected. It is certainly not a bad thing to make money or accrue power. But the question is "for whom and for what end" is the money and power accrued? The trappings of success in our culture are neither good nor bad. They are just tools and it all depends on what you do with them. Money is a tremendous tool when used to help people, restore justice, and support ministry. Power is a tremendous tool when it is used to change injustice, inspire people, and move life toward shalom. Success is "keeping your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you." ("If" by Rudyard Kipling) Success is living awake to the Spirit, using what you've been given to love God with heart, mind, soul, and strength, and to you're your neighbor as yourself.

What is failure? Failure is not being poor, unemployed, homeless, or a bad investor. It is not coming in last or somewhere that's not first. It is not sitting in the audience while the *really talented people* perform onstage! Failure is not a matter of not succeeding and achieving, but of not trying, of giving in to our excuses and our fear. The third servant failed because he valued not changing more than the opportunity to invest himself. He decided not to get involved and not to think outside the box. He sought to avoid the responsibility he didn't ask for, found himself in a hole, and kept on digging.

When anyone of us -- with a lot or a little talent, with a small amount of resources or a large amount, with great opportunities or almost no opportunities -- chooses to bury it or hide it participate in the failure of the third servant. I am that servant, at least sometimes in my life, when I choose to avoid the responsibility of either facing difficult choices or stepping up to use the gifts I have. I am that servant when I choose instead to hide or not speak out for or against important issues or when I choose not to show up to support a friend in grief or confront a loved one engaged in destructive behavior. I am that servant when I avoid my responsibility in significant relationships or allow my vision be too low or too safe.

What are the questions behind this parable. What are perhaps Jesus' questions? How creative are you in "hiding" your potential? What are you willing to risk to realize your possibilities, to be awake to the spirit life in and around you, and to live abundantly? Don't hide your gifts. Invest your life! This is God's calling for you; God's invitation for you to the dance of life.

Yesterday, on the plaza, I met a man Vincent Johnson. I was inspired to ask him about his view of success and failure. I told him that I was a pastor and that this information was for a sermon for tomorrow. He was delighted to share with me. Being successful, he stated, was first about faith, about knowing God cannot fail you. Second, success is about respect for yourself, for others, and respect for the reality that God is God and we're not. Failure, according to Vincent Johnson, is not having faith and not trusting that God can see you through. This story is compelling in part because this man has supported his seven children, only one of who is his biological child. They have all made it through school except for his youngest soon who is almost through high school.

This story is compelling in part because Vincent Johnson cannot read. He is illiterate. He told me that about himself because I am a pastor. Then he said, “you can tell your congregation tomorrow!” I met Vincent as he sat on an inverted bucket outside Barnes and Noble bookstore panhandling. I asked, “Why do you do this?” He replied, “I was fired from my previous work because I couldn’t read. It’s hard to get a job when you’re illiterate. I do this because I don’t want to steal.” Vincent Johnson illustrates being successful.

Most of us are a combination of all three servants in the parable. Each of us has opportunities and talents. Sometimes we do well and sometimes we dig a hole and hide our potential. The divine measure of success is not dollars made or power accrued, but how dollars are invested in the lives of people and how they are spent to bring hope and joy to others. Success is the measure of how power is used to bring justice in the form of education, opportunity, health care to people like Vincent Johnson. Poet W. H. Auden wrote:

“God may reduce you on Judgment Day
to tears of shame, reciting by heart
the poems you would have written, had
your life been good.”

W.H. Auden, epilogue, elegy to Louis MacNeice, *About the House*(1965), 23.

This quotation, like the parable of the talents, is not to shame or guilt us, but to challenge us to write those poems. The stakes for our living are tremendous. You and I have a tremendous opportunity to make a difference in at least a small corner of the world.

Crossroads Church began in response to a crisis and used that crisis creatively to shape itself into a unique community of faith with a commitment to freedom, to grow in faith, and make a difference in the world. Over the years, this dream has been refined. This vision has become more clarified and we stand here in 2009 with tremendous resources of talent, vision, and creativity. This is a faith community that demands to look outside the box and to color outside the lines. We are a breath of fresh air to a Christian Church that is desperate for such breath.

Crossroads has an opportunity to change the church and to model a pretty radical sense of inclusiveness, freedom, and passion for the life journey. We can change the church and by extension change the world by making things happen for the cause of justice. We can help restore hope by crossing barriers of fear and prejudice, inspiring people out of their lethargy and also fight our own!

This is what Crossroads is poised to be, but we are not there yet. Sometimes we’re like that third servant. We give in to our fears and fatigue, and forget that congregational leadership means congregational involvement. It means living our lives as fully as possible, both discovering and living in response to God’s invitation for our own lives. It is knowing that God is with you and cheering you on. It is also participation in what this congregation can be and do for the full inclusion in the great church of all people. It is to work for justice and access to opportunity for all and to live as deeply in the Spirit and awake to spirit presence as possible. We are not large in number in this room, but we can make our voice to be heard throughout Kansas City and around the world.

Call to action

If you want to move toward being more than you have been, us as a congregation toward being more than we have been up to now, I want you to contact me and set up a time to talk one on one. Let me hear your dream and you hear mine. And if you’re not sure what your dream is, we can talk about that. I want to talk with each of you because I believe that will move us forward as congregation toward what we can be

The parable tells us that we will only fail when we follow the path of least resistance, when we go with the crowd, rather than think and act for ourselves. We only fail when we fail to try and we all fail sometimes. This is not an easy journey. Jesus offered his life to show us the full extent of God’s love. In Jesus’ life and death, we can see the amount of commitment love requires to transform the world. The young Dutch woman Etty Hillisum, died in Aushwitz in 1943, wrote in her diary:

I am full of unease, a strange, infernal agitation which might be productive if only I knew what to do with it. [It is] a “creative” unease, ...almost a sacred unease. “O, God, take me into your great hands and turn me into your instrument...”

God's dream for creation is summarized in the Hebrew word Shalom, very much like the African word *Ubuntu*. It is life characterized by peace, wholeness, abundance, community, and justice. True success, true *ubuntu*, is never possible unless we all find it together, and for this purpose we journey together in God's Spirit.