

## LESSONS FROM GEORGE: INDULGING ANXIETY OR INVESTING IN THE FUTURE?

Matthew 25:14-30

George was a gregarious guy. He was a cigar salesman who loved his clients, especially the ones in the inner city. He was a loyal friend, he had a passion for the underdog, an intolerance for injustice and a great sense of humor. And he was a tortured soul. He grew up during the Depression. That experience taught him to be afraid. Afraid of poverty, afraid of bankruptcy and afraid of what others think of him. He also grew up with an undiagnosed reading disability, which meant fear led him his whole life. So saving money became the center of his life, with some very redeeming exceptions.

At the same time, he wanted to live well, *and* give the appearance that he was well off. So he went to restaurants regularly -- for the breakfast special or only the early bird dinner menu if you had your cocktail at home first and didn't order dessert. His wife Marian hand sewed monograms on their towels and on his shirts to create an illusion that they could afford more. They bought the finest early American furniture one piece at a time over the course of decades. And they saved all their money in assorted Certificates of Deposit that collected the bare minimum of interest - because it was safe that way.

It paid off. Until it didn't. He lived in his tiny starter home all his adult life. Finally he couldn't handle the maintenance any more so he and Marian moved to a one bedroom condo in a posh suburb nearby. Six weeks later, Marian sat down in her chair after breakfast and died.

George continued to save his money so he could buy into a prestigious senior living community with a continuum of care -- for when the time came. He qualified. Major accomplishment for a cigar salesman. A studio apartment was available. But no, he would wait. Living there would cost him more than staying in his condo.

He accidentally drove his car through the vestibule of his church and never drove again. The perfect time to make the move, to go where he wouldn't need a car. But no, he could still save money if he stayed in his condo. So he waited again. Finally he got to the point where, at 94, he couldn't live alone anymore. But this time his acceptance at the senior facility came with a contingency. If he needed to be in the health center during the first year, he would have to pay extra for it out of pocket. Otherwise, it would have been covered by the entrance fee.

He lasted one night in his new studio apartment. When they checked on him that first morning, they found him on the bathroom floor. "I was looking for my glasses," he tried to convince them. Round the clock nursing assistants were hired immediately and he got to stay in his studio apartment a few weeks - paying out of pocket for that help, out of that money he had so cautiously been saving. Finally he moved into the health care center permanently and paid out of pocket for that too - when he *could* have lived there for no extra charge, if he had only moved in a year earlier. But he couldn't take the risk. He lost years of his savings. His caution paid off. Until it didn't.

George reminds me of slave #3 in our Gospel today. Not that George was wicked and certainly not that he was lazy. But he was afraid. The third slave, another tortured soul, says as much to the master. "So I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground." A talent, in the context of today's reading, is

a sum of money worth about two years of wages. So slave #3 decides this money will be safest in the ground. He thinks playing it safe will pay off. Until it doesn't.

George was afraid of poverty. Slave #3 is afraid of his master. Fear kept them both from risking, from being more productive with their money. Slave #3 misunderstands the whole exercise. All the while *he* thinks maybe his master is *testing* him, to see if he will lose or steal the one talent he's been given. He thinks there might be a trap there, that conditions have been set up for him to fail. So he passes the test. But the test only exists in his own mind. He passes by doing nothing. By taking no risks. By keeping still. And it pays off. Until it doesn't.

In Scripture, many of Jesus' contemporaries are afraid of God. And they want to make a deal with God that they won't be punished as long as they submit or are passive. In the parable Jesus tells today, this kind of relationship has its consequence. Even the *one* talent will be taken away. If we cut through Matthew's hyperbole, we get this simple proverb: *Use it or lose it*. Our fear pays off. Until it doesn't. That's the best we can hope for, when we're scared of God. The challenge to us today is ironic: we ought only be afraid of *being afraid of God*. Franklin Roosevelt got that when he said at the height of the Great Depression, "The only thing to fear is fear itself."

This is such a great Gospel text for a congregation in transition. Your master has left, so to speak. The rector has left. You've been entrusted with resources – not just gifts Priest Lisa bestowed during her four years here -- but *all* the relational and spiritual and physical capital that has made up this wonderful community of faith since it began more than a hundred years ago, and beyond that, the great gifts of Scripture, tradition and reason that are the hallmarks of the Episcopal Church. What are you going to do with them? Bury them until the master returns – to play it safe until the new rector arrives? Not if I can help it!

I believe you are exactly *where* you need to be, you are exactly *how* you need to be right now, in order for God to lead you toward your next faithful step, to write the next chapter of your story. You are the perfect size. Each and every one of you has a perfect role to play and a perfect gift to bring to this adventure. Today's Gospel is such a great reminder to *Be who you are, see what you have, and do what matters to God*. It's not about grandiosity. It's not about being extraordinary. It's about being who you are in Christ. It's about keeping the main thing the main thing. It's not about success. It's about faithfulness. And faithfulness usually does look rather ordinary. Standing here, looking out at your faces, that's what I see: faithfulness.

Servants #1 and #2 are *faithful* in their tasks because, for whatever reasons, they aren't afraid. Somehow *they* understand that if they make an effort to improve their master's capital and fail, they won't be punished for it. Otherwise, where do they find the courage to take that kind of risk? Risk goes hand in hand with growth. And we will never have the courage to risk if we are afraid that by doing so we also risk losing the love God has for us. But that's impossible. In another place in the New Testament (1 John 4), we're reminded that there is no fear in love; that perfect love, the love of God, casts out fear.

George did take one big risk. They waited, characteristically, but late in their thirties, he and Marian had a son, an only child. Their son would grow up to be a person of uncompromising character and integrity. He would earn a PhD from the University of Chicago and go on to teach at the University of Michigan and still remain humble enough to be uncommonly devoted to his parents, especially his father as he aged. He would become an award-winning author of books about environmental policy

that his father would frame and hang on the wall but couldn't read himself. And his son took a big risk too. He married me.

I saw the kingdom come for George. For Christmas in 1995 I received a sizable gift certificate to a fine German restaurant. I knew immediately I would use it to give George the meal of his life - drinks, appetizers, the full German spread, including dessert *and* coffee - at no cost to him or us. A pure and total feast of absolutely unconditional love, love that he could trust. I never saw him so happy. Gleeful. Giddy. Fearless. And free. The total bill came within two cents of the gift certificate's value. Almost twenty years later, he was the most beloved resident of that health care center. He was incensed by racist comments made by a fellow church member about his home health aide whom he adored. He died peacefully on Easter Sunday, of 2014, the 95<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his baptism, with his loyal son and his beloved Dolores, his companion of 17 years, at his side. George's grandson has learned, through his own challenges. His mantra? "Don't indulge anxiety."

Shortly *we* tortured souls will gather for the meal of *our* lives, where we will join George and Marian and all the saints of St. John's and rectors past, present and future - the communion of saints on whose shoulders we stand during this time of transition. We will join in another pure and total feast of unconditional love, love that *we* can trust. And so God loves us and we love one another as we take risks together, not indulging in anxiety, but investing in God's future. Amen.

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