

Semicontinuous

Judg. 4:1–7

Ps. 123

Complementary

Zeph. 1:7, 12–18

Ps. 90:1–8, (9–11), 12

1 Thess. 5:1–11

Matt. 25:14–30

Venture Discipleship

Goal for the Session Adults will affirm the risks and joys inherent in following Jesus through the lens of Matthew’s parable of the talents.

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Matthew 25:14–30

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Thomas D. Stegman, SJ

The parable sets forth positive and negative examples of conduct while awaiting the return of the Lord. Not to be overlooked is the characterization of the master: as one who bestows gifts abundantly, carefully calibrates gifts on the basis of ability, gives his slaves freedom to respond with loving responsibility, and rejoices in their fidelity. While the parable initially intimates that the talents bestowed are external to the recipients (i.e., only to be managed by them), the detail in verse 29—“to all those who *have*, more will be given, and they will *have* an abundance” (italics added)—suggests that the talents do, in fact, enrich the recipients. The parable’s ending warns of the tragedy of acting timidly in response to God’s generosity.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Mark Douglas

We may get a more accurate reading of the master and the slave on the basis of their actions. Far from simply being harsh, the master acts generously, trusting even the third slave with the wealth of more than fifteen years’ wages. Far from reaping what he did not sow, he returns to their oversight the wealth that the first two slaves earned and, even more importantly, invites them into his joy, therein transforming his relationship with them from master/slave to something approaching equality (vv. 21, 23). This eschatological passage is about a willingness to resist fear and, like the first two slaves, to behave in risky and trusting ways, for in so doing we enter into joy upon the master’s return.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” John M. Buchanan

Here Jesus invites us to be his disciples, to live our lives as fully as possible by investing them, by risking, by expanding the horizons of our responsibilities. To be his man or woman, he says, is not so much believing ideas about him as it is following him. It is to experience renewed responsibility for the use and investment of these precious lives of ours. It is to be bold and brave, to reach high and care deeply. So the parable is the invitation to the adventure of faith: the high-risk venture of being a disciple of Jesus Christ.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Lindsay P. Armstrong

Faithful living is not static; yet, like this third slave, we are good at knowing without doing. We are adept at holding on to a talent entrusted, knowing what we should do with it, but not doing so. We know what faithful living looks like, but we hesitate to live it. We bury too much goodness, time, love, treasure, and talent in the ground. Compassionately addressing inactivity, fears, and/or misconceptions about God could be a freeing treasure to offer an insecure society.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE
Matthew 25:14–30

Focus on Your Teaching

Would you say most of your participants' lives reflect adventure or caution? Consider how they would react to the phrase "Nothing ventured, nothing gained." Some might hear it simply as a financial maxim related to the importance of receiving a good return on financial investments. But how might "venturing" resonate with their views on, and practices of, faith? Today's focus scripture relates a story that some participants may find challenging if not offensive. For older adults, this story may have been "tamed" by its frequent use in stewardship appeals. One key aspect of leading this session will be freeing the parable from that constraint.

Equip me, O God, for the preparing and leading of this session, according to your purposes. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- newsprint
- marker
- Bibles
- copies of Resource Sheet 1
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for November 22, 2020

For Responding

- option 1: copies of Resource Sheet 2
- option 2: paper, pens
- option 3: Resource Sheet 1

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, post a sheet of newsprint with "Nothing Ventured, Nothing Gained" written across it.

Welcome the participants. Introduce any newcomers as needed.

Direct participants to the newsprint headline. Ask them to recall the following:

- ✧ A time in your life when you took a risk to achieve some greater good;
- ✧ A time in your life when you balked at taking such a risk and regretted it.

Form pairs. Discuss these questions in light of those reflections:

- ✧ What empowered you to take the risk you did?
- ✧ What held you back from the risk you avoided?

Gather the group. Invite partners to offer brief comments on what empowered and what held them back from risk.

Affirm that today's session will explore how "nothing ventured, nothing gained" looms in the background of a parable Jesus tells about God's promised realm and our response to it. Then offer this prayer or one of your own choosing:

Holy God, guide me as I lead this session and help me follow Jesus every day of my life. Amen.

EXPLORING

Introduce today's Scripture by noting that this is the next to last parable Jesus tells about the *eschaton* ("end times") in his teachings on this subject in Matthew 24–25 in response to a question his disciples raised (Matthew 24:3).

A conventional theological reading of Matthew 25:14–30 treats it as a pericope on stewardship. Matthew is telling stories about the end of time—a point likely to be subverted or perverted when we focus too closely on stewardship.

Use the information in the sidebar to urge participants to separate the hearing of this parable from its overuse in stewardship campaigns. Remind participants that the word “talent” in this parable is not about its common English understanding of “something we can do well”—but rather, a large sum of money that is equivalent to what would have taken a common day laborer in Jesus’ era approximately 15 *years* to earn. Invite the participants to compute the equivalent of 15 times their annual income to rightly hear the import—and risk—in this parable.

Ask for five volunteers to read Matthew 25:14–30. Assign them the following five roles: narrator (Jesus); the first, second, and third servants; and the master. Have the remaining participants choose one of these characters in order to hear the parable read from the perspective of this character. Carry out the reading.

After the reading, invite those participants who listened from the perspective of one of its characters to offer reactions to the story, especially any questions that it raised. Invite readers to offer their reactions as well. Deal with questions or negative reactions without minimizing what some may find difficult in this parable or its message.

Explore in the whole group or small groups the following issues and others identified in the previous paragraph’s discussion:

- ✧ the importance of the phrase “to each according to his ability” in verse 15;
- ✧ the possible impact on the servants’ actions due to the enormous sum of money each was given;
- ✧ the meaning of “the joy of your master.”

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Matthew 25:14–30) and read both the “What?” and “Where?” excerpts. Explore the assertions made there about the master as “far from simply being harsh” and “generous.” Ask: *What actions of the master might affirm or contradict those assessments?*

One possible option: debate whether the first two servants fear the master, as does the third (vv. 24b–25a).

Read the “Now What?” excerpt on Resource Sheet 1. Discuss how the actions of all three servants in the parable undergird the excerpt’s argument that “faithful living is not static.” Invite participants to reflect on what risks and joys are evoked in their mind by the call issued in the excerpt’s final sentence. Ask: How might the church both encourage such risks and celebrate such joys?

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities, depending on the length of your session:

1. **Discipleship as Adventure** Following Jesus beckons us to venture out of safe enclaves for the sake of the gospel. Distribute copies and read Resource Sheet 2 (The Venture of Discipleship). Focus the ensuing conversation on participants’ reactions to the first

EASY
PREP

This exercise might threaten participants who deny being driven by fear, or who are currently overwhelmed by some fear. How might you encourage participants on either side of that spectrum to use this as a means of growth?

two sentences of the third paragraph (“The greatest risk of all . . .”). Identify where participants have seen such risks played out in the world and in their personal faith journeys. Encourage participants to use those two sentences to begin their daily prayers in the coming week, asking God: “What would you have me do today?”

- 2. Naming the Fears that Hold Us Back** Like the servant in the parable, we sometimes allow fear to prevent us from the risk of following Jesus. Distribute paper and pens. Have participants write the opening words of verse 25 (“I was afraid, and I . . .”) on the paper. Invite participants to think about and write down fears that hold them back from following Jesus more closely. Urge them to be specific. For each fear noted, invite them to imagine what Jesus would say to them about that fear. Have them write that beneath the fear. Urge participants to choose one of these entries to begin each day this week, identifying and committing to one action that day that would resist giving in to that fear.
- 3. Joyward Risk** Jesus’ parable links the risks of discipleship to the experience and promise of joyful relationship. Read the “So What?” excerpt on Resource Sheet 1. Invite participants to discern where joy might be found in the callings that unfold in that excerpt. Ask participants what joys they have experienced in their journey of discipleship. Encourage the group in the coming week to celebrate each day some particular joy that following Jesus has generated.

CLOSING

Gather the participants in a circle. Direct them again to the newsprint banner: “Nothing Ventured, Nothing Gained.” Invite them to call out words or phrases gained from today’s discussions or activities that bring fresh meaning to the ways those words on the banner resonate with discipleship.

Invite participants to silently call to mind one particular risk of discipleship that weighs on them. Explain the following commissioning exercise: One by one, each participant will step into the middle of the circle with that situation or dilemma in mind. (Assure participants they will not be called to say what it is.) As each person steps into the circle, the group will repeat this blessing:

(Name), in the face of fear, do not live afraid. Follow Jesus.

Practice the response several times, then begin the commissioning. Use it until everyone has moved inside the circle and received the commissioning.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for November 22, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and resource sheet prior to the next session.

Focus on Matthew 25:14–30

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The Venture of Discipleship

In today's parable, the property-owner commends those servants who risk venturing what has been entrusted to them. What might that mean for those who would follow Jesus today?



The third slave takes a very different approach with his money, his one talent. He digs a hole in the ground and puts all the money in the hole for safekeeping. In a time of stock-market decline, this man looks very wise. This is not a bad man. This is a prudent, careful, cautious investor. He is not about to take chances with the money. It is all there, every penny of it, when his master returns. He is proud of himself. "Here it is. All of it, safe and sound." For his efforts he is treated as harshly as anyone in the whole Bible.

The greatest risk of all, it turns out, is not to risk anything, not to care deeply and profoundly enough about anything to invest deeply, to give your heart away and in the process risk everything. The greatest risk of all, it turns out, is to play it safe, to live cautiously and prudently. Orthodox, conventional theology identifies sin as pride and egotism. However, there is an entire other lens through which to view the human condition. It is called sloth, one of the ancient church's seven deadly sins. Sloth means not caring, not loving, not rejoicing, not living up to the full potential of our humanity, playing it safe, investing nothing, being cautious and prudent, digging a hole and burying the money in the ground.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that the sin of respectable people is running from responsibility. Bonhoeffer, who was a pacifist, took his own responsibility so seriously he joined the Resistance and helped plan an assassination attempt on Hitler's life. His sense of responsibility cost him his life. How important is this personally, in terms of how we live our lives? Jesus' warning is that the outcome of playing it safe—not caring, not loving passionately, not investing yourself, not risking anything—is something akin to death, like being banished to the outer darkness.

—Excerpted from John M. Buchanan, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 310 and 312