

You may have heard about the man who was angry with God, and said, "God, I have been praying every day for three years that I would win the state lottery. You told us to ask and we shall receive. How come, in all these 3 years, I have never once received what I have asked for?" Then he heard the voice of God, loud and clear. "My dear son, please do me a favor --- buy a lottery ticket."

This is not a promotion for the lottery (but it did get your attention-- didn't it?) The story illustrates the point, "if you wanna win, you gotta play." There are 2 diverse groups of people in our churches today: risk-takers and those who don't want to step out of their comfort zone and take a chance. The problem with don't-take-a-chancers is that they might show up at their own funerals with too little to show for the lives they have lived. Jesus warns us against this in today's gospel - the Parable of the Talents.

The Parable of the Talents piggy backs on to the first reading from Proverbs about the very productive wife who bears fruit in all things. She is a whirl wind -- a multi-tasker. She uses every opportunity to increase the family coffers. Her fine qualities make her far more precious than jewels.

Because she is extremely successful, her children and husband regard her highly. They show appreciation and praise her. She is a risk-taker. (One wonders what her husband was doing while she was busy multi-tasking and risk taking?)

And what about the 3 men in the well known gospel parable of the talents? The master departs and the first 2 servants "went off at once and traded" with their talents. The third servant, on the other hand, digs a hole in the ground and buries his one talent. He is a don't-take-a-chancer. Perhaps, he thought: "Well those with more talents can afford to take a risk, but I can't. So I better play it safe and just take care of what I have now."

But, we learn, that is not what this master expects. The 3rd servant is not rewarded for keeping his talent safe. Instead he is punished for not taking a chance and growing it!

In Jesus' time, a talent was a high value unit of currency. In the English language, we use the word "talent" to refer to a gift or skill one possesses. You can easily see the connection. In either case, a talent is not something to be squandered.

Let's put Jesus in the role of the man going on the journey and cast ourselves in the part of the servants. We might well reflect on the talents the Lord has given us-- not in coins but in gifts or skills. How does he expect us to use them-- hide them away or invest in them and make them grow.

We, at St. Cecilia, are a parish of diverse and gifted individuals-- young, old and in-between. Each of us has been given special talents - but how many of us are like the third servant? Because we don't see ourselves as possessing outstanding gifts and talents, we conclude that there is nothing we do that can contribute to the larger community.

For some of us, it may take a lifetime to discover all our talents. If we want to discover our full talent potential, we must be prepared to be risk-takers. Sometimes, we even have to change gears to find our hidden talents and put them to good use.

A few years ago, at the unlikely occasion of a friend's wake in Chicago, my wife Kay and I met a nun who has done just that- changed gears to make better use of her gifts and talents. Sr. Nancy Murray is a Dominican nun and just happens to be the sister of, the sometimes controversial comedic actor, Bill Murray. After Sr. Nancy had been a teacher and worked as a campus minister and was well into her middle years, her talent for the theater surfaced. She developed and began acting in one-woman shows depicting saintly women. Sr. Nancy is in demand all over the country and beyond the continental U.S. sharing her presentations and using that talent to teach and entertain, as well as help support her community. Sr. Nancy Murray is a risk-taker.

For some, circumstances may elicit talents they never knew they had. Many of you know (or know of) Fr. Ev Hemann. He was pastor at St. Thomas for 16/17 years before moving to St. Pat's in Cedar Falls to replace Fr. Jim when Fr. Jim came to St. Cecilia.

In April, Fr. Ev was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. In an article in last Sunday's DSM Register, he said, "I am dying....My family and community taught me that my life and talents were not just for myself but to be used in service to others....Even in dying I am called to serve others in teaching how to live....By accepting and embracing this ultimate challenge as best I can, I have witnessed and encouraged others to accept and embrace whatever difficulties are in their lives ...." Fr. Ev could have been bitter at having his life cut short. He could have just retreated in his last months. Instead he has been willing to risk using his talents to share his final journey with others who need him.

Today Fr. Jim will be blessing some of the 100 or so young people and adults who are going later this week to the National Catholic Youth Conference in Indianapolis. Did you know that the Archdiocese of Dubuque is sending a larger delegation than any diocese in the country and that St. Cecilia Parish is sending the largest group from any parish in the diocese? These young people from our parish are risk-takers.

Finally, this morning, we have 18 candidates in the RCIA who will be going through the Rite of Welcome and Acceptance. These folks, too, are risk-takers for the faith.

As we come to the end of the church's liturgical year, we are reminded in today's readings, as we have been for the past few Sundays, that the responsibility for living according to our faith can not be put off. Sooner or later, we will each be asked to account for how we have used (or misused) our gifts and talents. How will you respond? Are you a risk-taker or a don't-take-a-chancer? It's not too late to shift gears.

Deacon Gary Aitchison  
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