

How to stay safe without taking risk, in reference to the servant who was given one talent who didn't want to take the risk of losing it, so he hid it: 1. Avoid riding in automobiles because they are responsible for 20% of all fatal accidents. 2. Do not stay home because 17% of all accidents occur in the home. 3. Avoid walking on streets or sidewalks because 14% of all accidents occur to pedestrians. 4. Avoid travelling by air, rail, or water because 16% of all accidents involve these forms of transportation. 5. Of the remaining 33%, 32% of all deaths occur in hospitals. So, above, all else, avoid hospitals. But you will be pleased to learn, only .001% of all deaths occur in worship services in Church, and these are usually related to previous physical disorders. Therefore, logic tells us that the safest place for you to be at any given point in time is at Church! And Bible study is safe too. The percentage of deaths during Bible study is even smaller. So for Safety's sake: Attend Church, and read the Bible. IT COULD SAVE YOUR LIFE!

The penultimate Sunday of the liturgical year reminds us, not only of the end of the liturgical year, but also of the end of all things and of the preparations we need to make to reach heaven. The main theme of the three readings is an invitation to live in such a way that we make the best use of the talents God has given us, so that at the hour of our death Our Lord will say: "Well done, my good and faithful servant...Come and share the joy of your master."

When we hear the word talent, we automatically think of some special gift that we have, like writing poetry or singing or drawing or playing sports. In today's parable the talents the master gave his servants were indeed special gifts, but in the vocabulary of the ancients it referred to a special weight, such as 60 to 80 pounds of gold or silver. Today, it means "giftedness." The English word "talent" originated from this parable, as in our gifts of "time, talent, and treasure."

Today's Gospel reading challenges us to ask the questions: "Am I using my talents and gifts primarily to serve God? Am I doing everything I can to carry out God's will?" The parable of the talents challenges us to do something positive, constructive and life-affirming with our talents here and now.

A very rich Master, about to set off on a journey, entrusted very large sums of money or talents to three of his servant-slaves, each according to his personal ability: five, two, and one. A talent was worth between five and six thousand denarii – or about 15 years' wages for a simple day laborer. Even one talent could be worth more than a laborer would earn in a lifetime. The rich Master freely bestowed the money upon all three servant-slaves as a fiduciary entrustment, with the responsibility of investing it. The amounts were enormous to these slaves who, of themselves, had nothing and earned nothing. Through skillful trading and investing,

the slave with the five talents, trusting in the righteousness of his Master, managed to make five more – doubling his Master’s money. The servant-slave with the two talents did the same. The third slave, however, buried his talent in the ground. He did not trust in the Master’s loving righteousness and so was afraid to take the risk, afraid of the consequences of losing all the money, and afraid of the Master’s reaction if he did. On the day of accounting, the Master rewarded the two clever and trusting servant-slaves, but punished the third untrusting slave whom he called “wicked and lazy slave.” He took the third servant-slave’s talent and gave it to the first servant-slave. Clearly the Master did not want security – but initiative. He exposed the third slave’s explanation as a mere excuse for irresponsibility and laziness. Even the most timid person could at least have invested the one talent with bankers and gained interest from it, the Master pointed out.

Antonio Stradivari was born in Cremona, Italy, in 1644. Because Antonio’s voice was high and squeaky, he did not pass the audition for the Cremona Boys’ Choir. When he took violin lessons, the neighbors persuaded his parents to make him stop. Yet Antonio still wanted to make music. His friends made fun of him because his only one talent was wood-carving. When Antonio was 22, he became an apprentice to a well-known violinmaker, Nicholas Amati. Under his master’s training Antonio’s knack for carving grew, and his hobby

became his craft. He started his own violin shop when he was 36. He worked patiently and faithfully. By the time he died at 93, he had built over 1,500 violins, each one bearing a label that read, “Antonius Stradivarius Cremonensis Faciebat Anno... Antonio Stradivarius of Cremona made in the year.... They are the most sought-after violins in the world and sell for more than \$100,000 each. Antonio couldn’t sing, or play, or preach, or teach, but he used the one ability he had, and his violins are still making beautiful music all over the world today. Antonio is a challenge to people who have only a single talent and who try to bury the talent for fear of failure – like the lazy servant in Jesus’ parable.

The basic message of today’s Gospel is that we all have talents. Maybe not spectacular or dramatic like other people who get national or international acclaim; just ordinary, but nevertheless important. Experts say that the average person uses only a fraction of their talents. One of the main reasons why people do not use their talents to the full is because they have been belittled in the past. To belittle is to put someone down, to make them feel small, lessen their sense of self-worth. There are many ways of demeaning another person: cynicism, sarcasm, non-appreciation, taking for granted. The antidote to belittle is to lift people up, encourage them to value themselves.

What held the third servant from using his one talent to produce and earn something for his master was fear. “I was afraid, and I went off and hid your talent in the ground.”

Many of us may find ourselves having some sympathy for the third servant, because deep down, we are only too well aware how fear can hold us back and prevent us from doing what we are well capable of doing. Fear can be a much more powerful force in the lives of some than others. Those who have experienced a lot of criticism growing up can be slow to take a risk and may develop fearful approach to life.

Jesus was only too well aware of the disabling power of fear in people’s lives. Hence it is striking the number of times in the gospels he addressed people with the words, “Do not be afraid.” When Simon Peter fell down at Jesus’ knees saying, “Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.” Jesus replied to him, “Do not be afraid, from now on it is people you will catch.” When fear threatened to hold Peter back, Jesus called him forward into a new way of life. Jesus was present to people in ways that released them from their fear. In particular, he did not want fear of failure to hold people back. He could cope with failure in others. He knew that many people could learn from failure. There was little to be learned from staying put. There was much to be learned from striking out, even if failure was experienced along the way.

The tragedy of the third servant in the parable today is that, out of fear, he hid what had been entrusted to him, even though he had the ability to use it well. We have each been graced in some way by the Lord for the service of others. If I hide what the Lord has given me, others are thereby deprived. Most of us need a bit of encouragement to place our gifts at the disposal of others. Part of our Baptismal calling is to give others courage, to encourage others. A couple of verses beyond where today's second reading ends, Paul writes: "Encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing." In these difficult times for the Church, the ministry of encouragement is all the more necessary. There is much to be learned from the mistakes of the past, but the Lord would not want us to go to ground. Now is not the time to hide our Good News of salvation in the ground out of fear. Rather, it is a time to encourage each other to share this treasure so that the Church may become all that God is calling it to be.