

“Great Lessons from Plants and Trees: Part 3”

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Scriptures

Deuteronomy 31:6-8

Matthew 25:14-30

Hymns/Songs

“Shall We Gather At the River”

“Great Is Thy Faithfulness” 56

“Take My Life” 215

Deuteronomy 31:6-8

⁶ Be strong and courageous. Do not fear or be in dread of them, for it is the LORD your God who goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you.”

⁷ Then Moses summoned Joshua and said to him in the sight of all Israel, “Be strong and courageous, for you shall go with this people into the land that the LORD has sworn to their fathers to give them, and you shall put them in possession of it. ⁸ It is the LORD who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not leave you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed.”

Matthew 25:14-30

The Parable of the Talents

¹⁴ “For it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property. ¹⁵ To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. ¹⁶ He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more. ¹⁷ So also he who had the two talents made two talents more. ¹⁸ But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money. ¹⁹ Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰ And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, ‘Master, you delivered to me five talents; here, I have made five talents more.’ ²¹ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.’ ²² And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, ‘Master, you delivered to me two talents; here, I have made two talents more.’ ²³ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.’ ²⁴ He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, ²⁵ so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours.’ ²⁶ But his master answered him, ‘You wicked and slothful servant! You knew

that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed? ²⁷ Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸ So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. ²⁹ For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. ³⁰ And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

**MAY THE GOOD LORD BLESS THE HEARING,
THE UNDERSTANDING AND THE LIVING OF HIS HOLY WORD. AMEN**

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Revelation Revealed 202

“*That thou art neither cold nor hot*” signifies that they who are such, sometimes deny that the Word is Divine and holy, and at other times acknowledge it. At one time to deny the holiness of the Word, and at another time to acknowledge it, is “to be neither cold nor hot,” for they are against the Word and also for the Word. They are also such concerning God, at one time they deny, and at another time acknowledge him; in like manner as to all things of the church; for which reason they are sometimes with those who are in hell, and at other times with those who are in heaven. They fly as it were between both, up and down, and wherever they fly, thither they turn the face. They become such who have confirmed with themselves the belief in the existence of God, of heaven and hell, and of life eternal, and afterwards recede from it. When the first confirmation returns, they acknowledge, but when it does not return, they deny. They recede because they afterwards think only of themselves and the world, continually aspiring to preeminence, and thereby they immerse themselves in their proprium; thus hell swallows them up.

SERMON: “Great Lessons from Plants and Trees: Part 3”

Have you ever thought of yourself as a risk-taker? We may define a risk-taker as: someone willing to take risks in order to succeed, which may end in defeat or failure. A risk-taker is someone who risks loss or injury in the hope of gain or excitement. Also known as an adventurer or perhaps even a cagey gambler, risk-takers understand that a valuable end or goal is so worthwhile that they are willing to risk being unable to achieve it as well. Certainly in the great narrative of the Hebrew Scriptures, we see the theme of risk-taking became prominent. For example, in the time of Moses, the Hebrews who had grown strong in numbers became a threat to Pharaoh, the king of

Egypt. Twice the Pharaoh gave orders to kill all of the male babies born to Hebrew women, but in each case God was able to carefully keep enough of the Hebrew's sons alive. [The midwives took the risk of being found out by Pharaoh, as they pretended to always be late in helping the Hebrew women giving birth and were therefore unable to follow Pharaoh's orders](#)—all the while knowing that if they were found out, their necks would be next in line. The infant Moses' own Hebrew mother made her own risk assessment and chose a risky option: rather than following Pharaoh's orders by allowing her baby Moses to be thrown into the Nile River to become crocodile food, instead she made a watertight basket and floated him down the river, still risking his well-being, with the hope that some loving Egyptian woman might find Moses' tiny ark, have pity on him and save his life. **And Pharaoh's own daughter did just that.**

Under Moses' leadership some 65 years later, a new breed of risk-takers were groomed and honed, made ready to seek out their Promised Land. They went in strengthened by these words: ["Be strong and courageous. Do not fear or be in dread of them, for it is the LORD your God who goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed."](#) (Deut. 31:6,8) **Their risks were high, but their faith in and love for the Lord were higher.**

In our New Testament Gospel narrative, the theme of risk-taking appears again many times. I hear it vividly in our *Matthew 25* story when Jesus was helping His followers to better understand what His kingdom of Heaven was about and how the Lord entrusts a lot of skills, wealth and abilities to all of us, [hoping we will choose to be intelligent risk-takers](#). The landowner gave varying amounts of money, known back then as "talents," to each servant. A *talent* was a monetary unit worth about twenty years' wages for a laborer. It was equal to 6,000 denarii (a denarius being one small silver coin). One talent of money in Christ's day would be worth just over \$1,400,000 in today's money. One servant was given five talents, to another was given two talents and the third was given one talent. And then the landowner says to them in effect, do your best as investors and leaders and take good risks, with the hope of multiplying your investments in the world around you to be of good use. The first two servants went for it and they spent their money well, which culminated in very good returns. The third servant was sore afraid, however, and chose to be highly cautious. He chose to avoid taking prudent risks and instead buried his \$1.4 million dollars in the dirt. The first two servants doubled their money and were highly praised, while the third servant did nothing with his master's money, who was scolded severely for not taking good risks.

Why was he reprimanded so severely? In short because he had forgotten what the essence of our lives is about—he forgot that we are all here to be useful every day. God implores us, to take the risk of being useful as we follow His commandments and ways. The Lord asks us to do what we can with what we have, while we allow the Lord to energize us with His love and enlighten us with His truth, and then leave the rest to Him.

So, it really shouldn't surprise us to see this theme of being risk-takers within both the plant and animal kingdoms, playing out constantly—all with the hope of seeing both survival and transformation in the end. As Dr. Beronda Montgomery shares in her excellent book, *Lessons from Plants*, “Risk assessment and decision-making inform almost every stage of a plant’s lifecycle.” (p. 58) For many years botanists used to think that plants never engaged in risk assessment, but many recent studies prove otherwise. Unlike animals, plants cannot uproot themselves and move to other ground when resources like water and nutrients are scarce. During such times, they become high-roller risk-takers when in unpredictable environments. For example, “If a plant’s roots are located between two environments, one with a constant but low level of nutrients and one with varying levels, the plant will choose to proliferate more roots into the area with varying levels. The plant is gambling on being exposed—even intermittently—to sufficient levels of nutrients.” (*ibid.* p. 57-58)

Plants are able to constantly assess their environment, knowing when resources are variable or limited. Plants may respond by redistributing resources, finding ways of locating new resources, ceasing their growth, as well as communicating their difficult situation to other plants nearby. They also may forge symbiotic relationships with bacteria or fungi, taking the risk of relationship reciprocity as a means for survival. And, “It is important to keep in mind that when plants engage in symbiotic relationships to increase access to nutrients [such as nitrogen and phosphorus], they are still taking risks.” (p. 64) These plants are anticipating a hoped-for payoff by using their resources for better living found in teamwork. In short, plants are constantly taking risks when considering their opportunities and discerning where to invest their energy.

I perceive a lot of correspondence or symbolism between plants and our own thought processes as spiritual human beings. Plants rely on careful environmental sensing to provide themselves with the information they need, enabling them to identify potential risks and guide their decision-making processes. “They assess what resources are in short supply, what collaborators are available to help alleviate specific resource limitations, and how to initiate and maintain collaborative relationships for

improved resource acquisition.” (p. 68) Dr. Montgomery writes, “We humans could learn how to better sense our surroundings, assess risks, and support one another in the way that plants do. We should support each other’s short and long-term goals, opportunities, decisions and how to allocate or redistribute our resources” whether our goals are personal, institutional or community oriented.

Going back to the Lord’s parable of the talents, we are given tremendous ability to look around at our family, community and worldwide struggles and problems, even when these challenges can feel to us to be overwhelming. In New Church theology, we find that the Lord provides us with a fairly simple action model to use, especially when we are faced with what we perceive as a risky situation. **Our theology informs us that everything good is from the Lord, and what we need to do is remove that which is selfish, evil or hateful within us, allowing the Lord’s Love to then flow into us and fill in the spaces now present within our hearts.** Rather than the Lord doing all of the work Himself on Earth, He entrusts us to partner with Him to bring about good. He empowers us to conquer evil from the inside out in ourselves personally. In *Doctrine of Life* n. 31 we read, “Every person by nature is such that he can shun evils, as if of himself alone, from the Lord’s power if he implores it; and what he does after this, is good from the Lord.”

So, first we must stop being part of the problem: take a look at yourself and cooperate with the Lord in removing destructive habits that sneak their way into your way of living. **Then, be part of the solution.** It might be small—such as just doing your existing work with integrity, but these often have ripple effects on tragedies across the globe. Indeed, as we turn away from the darkness inside ourselves we will invite the hands of God to guide us. To be sure, all of life is in God’s hands, but those Divine hands are guiding human ones, helping more and more people to engage in God’s handiwork. **We will still grieve when we see suffering. And when we fail at our risk-filled choices, we can feel “blue” for a while. But, we can use that sorrow to discover what strand of the Lord’s love we especially resonate with and then move forward and try again.**

In conclusion, my friends, let us rejoice in the wealth of love and wisdom the Lord grants for you to use each day, whether He gives you five talents, two talents or one talent of spiritual wealth within you. Let us remove the barriers that hell casts in our way. And know with deep faith that however things unfold, it’s all in God’s hands no matter what. His Providence makes sure we’re flowing down His stream of goodness coming about in the long run. Truly everyone, like the plants and trees surrounding us, the Lord gives us great capacity to assess our environment and our relationships, as we

discern what collaborations, teamwork and skills we need to use to be of greatest use. And then it's up to us to use them as we see fit, knowing that in the end our Master shall say to us also, "Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master." (Mtt. 25:21)

Amen.