

Taking Risks
Matthew 25:14-30
November 19, 2017 – Thanksgiving Sunday

The parables of Jesus are always challenging. They were meant to be challenging. They were meant to provide food for thought, something to “chew on”; and this parable is no exception. A man is leaving on a journey. Jesus doesn’t tell us how long the journey is – two months, six months, maybe even a year; but a man leaves on a journey. While he’s gone he entrusts his servants with his wealth. To one servant he gives five talents, to another two and to a third one. Now a talent was a huge amount of money – approximately sixteen years of wages for the average laborer. By today’s standards we might estimate it as about a quarter million dollars. This was not small trust.

But beyond that, I submit that this is primarily a parable about risk. Did you pick up on the fact that both the first and the second servant doubled their investments. Now, I don’t know about you; but, if there’s a safe investment in which I can double my money in two months or six months or even a year, I want to know about it. No, any investment that might yield 100% annual interest is certainly very risky; and the same would have been true in the first century. What’s left unsaid in this parable is that servant number one and servant number two took significant risks with a large sum of their master’s money. And I tell you, they got lucky; they doubled their investments.

So what do we want to do with servant number three. Servant number three played it safe. Servant number three said, “Look at servant number one and number two. How foolish they are. They’re taking a huge risk; and what’s going to happen if they lose? They will be in a heap of trouble. I’d better just take good care of this money and be sure I don’t lose any of it.” Now, I know that the master in our parable says that servant number three should have at least put the money in the bank so it would have received interest; but I tell you, in the first century, even that was not without risk. There was no Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation in first century Palestine. No, it’s safest to keep the money “under the bed” or bury it in the ground.

But this is a parable, and Jesus was not concerned with money. No, Jesus’ primary concern is the Good News of God’s Amazing Love; and accepting that Good News and accepting the call to spread that Good News is not without risk.

First there’s the risk to Jesus, for Jesus teaches this parable on the road, on the road from Galilee to Jerusalem, on the road from fertile valleys to desert rocks, on the road from a pretty safe life as a humble carpenter to the dangerous life in the midst of Jewish and Roman politics, on the road from a life as an itinerant preacher to death on a cross. Jesus felt the call to go to Jerusalem. Jesus felt the call to confront the world of Roman oppression and Jewish legalism. The journey was not without risk. The journey ended at a cross.

Then there's the people to whom Matthew is writing this Gospel; and let us not forget that the Gospels were written to a young, fledgling Christian community approximately fifty years after the death of Jesus, give or take a few decades depending on the Gospel. For sake of argument, let us assume that Matthew was written in 80 AD. Being a Christian in 80 AD was not without risk. If you were discovered to be a Christian, you might be hauled away by Roman authorities. You might be asked to pray to the emperor, to burn incense to the emperor, and to publicly declare that the emperor is God and not Jesus Christ. If you refused, at a minimum you could expect to be whipped and thrown into jail; and, if you were male, you might be feed to the lions or crucified. If you were a woman, you might be burned at the stake. Indeed being a Christian bore huge risk. As I have stated before, I believe the greatest miracle of Christianity is that, in the midst of violent persecution, the Christian church not only survived but continued to grow. It grew because Christians took extreme risks.

In many parts of the world today, that risk still exists. It was a few month back that I spoke about our countries immigration policies. I told you about a young man named Wujeeb who came to my office simply to give me his book had tell me his story. Wujeeb came to this country as a refugee from Afghanistan in 2010. At that time he was 24 years old. He had endured numerous beating throughout his teenage years; and his life and the lives of his family members were majorly at risk because Wujeeb was reading the Bible and exploring Christianity. Sadly, given the recent changes in government regulations, I'm not sure Wujeeb would be welcomed into this country today. Fortunately, he became a naturalized citizen in 2013 so he does not risk deportation. But don't miss my point. In many parts of the world, the risk for being a Christian is as great or greater than it was in the first century.

This Thursday is Thanksgiving, and I'll say more about that in a minute: but, I hope, in the midst of your Thanksgiving Prayers, you will include thanks that in this nation we can all worship and express your thoughts freely, without fear, without risk. Many of us, maybe even most of us, have a lot of problems with what's happening in Washington these days; and I include progressives and conservatives, Democrats and Republicans, in that number. I recently heard a quote of Mark Twain's that said, "Being a patriot means loving our country all the time and loving our government when it deserves it." I like that. I love the United States of America and the Constitution on which it is founded. I don't always love the actions of our government; but I still believe this is the greatest nation in the world; and I give thanks that I am a part of this nation. I give thanks that I can stand in this pulpit and criticize our nation's policies without risk; and I give thanks that, should you choose to disagree with me, you too can do that without risk also. My friends that's a great nation. I give thanks for the United States of America; and, while he is concerned about the immigration status of other refugees, I can tell you that Wujeeb also gives thanks for the United States of

America. He has personally expressed great appreciation for those in the State Department who helped him obtain refugee status and move to America.

But back to the risks. . . As Christians, you and I are still called to take risks. This church is called to take risks. “Our Faithful Journey,” our long range plan, is a risk. It will require financial resources. It will require the work of some people who aren’t quite sure where things will go. There will be littler risks along the way. Some of the programs will succeed, and some might fail. But our only choice would be to play servant number three, to bury our treasure in the ground, to go on with business as usual, with a slowly decreasing and slowly aging membership until one day we could not longer support ourselves and we put the key in the door for the last time. That’s the risk this parable addresses.

And so, on this Thanksgiving, as I’m thankful for our country, I am also thankful for our church. Way too many churches, good churches with very good people, have played servant number three. Not because, as the parable might suggest they were somehow wicked or lazy, no, no. They just saw “the handwriting on the wall” a little too late, or they weren’t able to take the risks, or sometimes, due to circumstances beyond their control, the risks didn’t pan out. And so, I’m thankful for our church. I’m thankful for each of you, our members and friends, and thankful for “Our Faithful Journey” and the future it represents.

But this brings me to the toughest risks of all. . . the personal risks, the risks that each of us, you and I are called to take. Some of those risks do revolve around “Our Faithful Journey.” I’ve already spoken about the financial commitment to our Long Range Plan. But let’s be honest. . . Most of us, when we fill out our pledge cards, aren’t making a huge financial risk. Most of us don’t need to worry about where our next meal will come from. I remember sitting in a seminary classroom one day, and hearing another student say, “Let’s face it, we’re all just one paycheck away from being homeless.” I said nothing, but I thought about how blessed I am. I am certainly not rich; but, as an older, second career person, I have reasonable retirement savings. I am certainly not “one paycheck away from being homeless,” and that too is reason to be thankful. I’ve given the figures before from this pulpit: 30% of the people in this world do not have a reliable source of food and are hungry some or all of the time, and 17% are severely undernourished and are always hungry. Friends, when we consider those figures, we again have reason to be thankful, thankful to be living where we are, thankful to always have food on our tables.

But there’s also a call in those figures, a call to take risks, a call to do something. Oh, I’m not sure what “something” is. Maybe it means raising money for the global church. Maybe it means doing some Volunteers in Mission work through the United Methodist Committee on Relief. Some of the risks we are asked to take through “Our Faithful Journey” and elsewhere will involved the giving of time to new programs, we’ll be doing some new things – that’s risk-taking. It’s also hugely exciting, educational, and stimulating for us as individuals

and for the church. (I do, at this point, need to take an aside. I have referred to “Our Faithful Journey.” our long range plan, as a risk. “Our Faithful Journey” was carefully constructed with evaluation and revision along the way. So, if some of our little risks along the way don’t pan out, the plan can quickly be revised to insure its overall success. We need to have confidence in that.)

Friends, I have been hugely blessed. I have been hugely blessed by the gifts that God has given me; and I have been hugely blessed by the opportunities that I have had to develop those gifts. Many of those opportunities have presented themselves merely be accident of my birth. Indeed, I am privileged merely because I was born into a white middle-class American family. In fact, some have criticized me for not saying enough about the issues of race and class and ethnicity and sexual orientation and socio-economic status that divided us. I have taken those criticisms to heart and you may hear more about that in the future.

But this Thanksgiving, I will simply give thanks for my God-given gifts and the opportunities to develop them. I will give thanks for the joys that those gifts have brought, and I will also pray that I might not be afraid to take risks in using those gifts for the service of Christ and the furtherance of God’s kingdom upon this world. I invite you to do the same.

I close by quoting the commentator, John Buchanan who states: “[The Parable of the Talents] is an invitation to the adventure of faith: the high-risk venture of being a disciple of Jesus Christ.” Will you accept the invitation? Will this church accept the invitation? Will our country accept the invitation? May it be so.

Let us pray. . .

Lord, help us accept the invitation,
the invitation to be your disciple,
the invitation to take the risks,
that all we do may be for the furtherance of your kingdom
upon this earth. Amen.

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