

Well Done!

A Sermon by
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Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
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Psalm 123
Matthew 25:14-30

Why does this parable always remind me of “The Apprentice?” You remember that reality show that was on television a couple of years ago, where people would compete for a position on Donald Trump’s staff. At the beginning of every show, the contestants would be sent off on assignment. At the end of every show, those who did well were allowed to stay another week, but someone was always sent packing. People stayed tuned for that final moment when Donald Trump would say, “You’re fired!” So every week, there was the risk of being the one who heard those words, which only made the competition even more cut-throat. But for the ones who survived, the risk was apparently worth it.

All of us live every day with risks that we’re probably not even aware of; risks, that if we were truly conscious of them, would likely keep us in bed or at least pinned to our chairs at the breakfast table, unwilling to face the day. But you’re sitting here this morning, so you may already be aware of the statistics I read a couple of years ago, which reported that twenty percent of fatal accidents are in automobiles; seventeen percent of all accidents occur at home; sixteen percent are travel related – by air, rail, or water. But only .001 percent of all deaths reported, that’s one in every 100,000 according to the mathematician in my house, occur in worship services. So here you are – obviously in the safest place you can be this morning. Like most pastors, I think a lot about membership development and growth, and those kinds of statistics make me wonder why we’re not putting folding chairs in the aisles week after week! Or at least why more churches haven’t figured out the evangelism potential of those numbers. Of course, we would have to play down the statistics attached to getting here in the first place, otherwise I think we might have something.

And, of course, you know I’m joking. My point is simply that life is not without risk, whether we’re here or on the road. So we all find ways to minimize the risk to ourselves and those we love as best we can, and, for the most part, life goes on as usual. Even in the face of or the memory of devastating loss, we have that unique human capacity to somehow carry on. Having weighed the options, we go about our lives with deliberate dailiness, knowing that it can change in the blink of an eye, and yet choosing to trust our ability to survive. In truth, we probably don’t think much about it. Unless we are brought to our knees by the prospect of our own mortality, or are faced with a life or death decision that affects someone we love, we tend to minimize the risks of being alive on this

planet at this moment in time. And, really, how else could we get out of bed in the morning? Living is risky business.

When we do begin to talk about the risks that we're willing to take, we tend to put them into fairly concrete and limited categories. Some risks, for example, have to do with how we spend our leisure time – from rock climbing to scaling Mt. Everest, from parasailing to ski jumping, mountain biking to scuba diving – a little risk makes it more exciting, more challenging, more fun. Some other risks have to do with vocation, choosing a career path that carries some significant risk. I don't know this congregation all that well, but I'm pretty sure we don't have trapeze artists or Nascar drivers among us, but there are undoubtedly some who risk life and limb on a regular basis. Still other risks have to do with how we invest our financial resources – and once again a little risk makes it more exciting, more challenging, more interesting, maybe more fun. And as we've learned again in the past few weeks, all risks come with consequences, and that's part of the challenge.

That's one of the places we find ourselves in today's Gospel lesson, known as the "Parable of the Talents." At one level, it is about money and investments; and, whether by design or happenstance, this particular scripture passage always seems to come around at the time of year when churches are preparing budgets. It is most certainly about money. Consider that a talent was a sum of money equal to the wages of a day laborer for fifteen years, give or take a few years depending on which commentary you read. Some say five years, some more than thirty years' salary. In any case, it wasn't pocket money, it was a sizable chunk of change by anybody's reckoning. Three servants are each entrusted with large sums of money, actually given it outright, with no clear instruction as to what they should do with it until the master's return, and no idea about the timing of his return. Two of them immediately trade with their allotment, and double their money. But the third buries his, perhaps following the rabbinic teaching of the day, which said that, "Whoever immediately buries property entrusted to him is no longer liable because he has taken the safest course conceivable."¹ Which is probably the course that many of us would have taken.

When the master returns home, the first two servants are praised for their ingenuity and rewarded with full invitation to the master's house and table, not to mention responsibility and oversight of additional property. The third, one-talent servant, the one we might imagine being praised for his caution, is scolded, and his selfish motives to protect himself are ultimately revealed. What little he had is unceremoniously taken from him and given to the first servant, the one who was originally given five talents, which he had already parlayed into ten.

Now if we think this is merely a lesson in market economics, appropriate for the stewardship season, we should probably think again. There is another layer, one that we often preach with this text, which has to do with how we use our own God-given talents – gifts and graces if you will – in service to God. And, indeed, that's not a bad place to land with this parable either. We all need to be

¹ *The Good News According to Matthew*, John Knox Press, 1975, p. 471.

prayerful about what we bring to the table. One of the great joys of working with new member classes, as I have been the past couple of weeks, is hearing the variety of gifts that people bring into our faith community. We do expect church members to commit a portion of their time, their talents, and their financial resources. We talk about spiritual gifts, we talk about volunteerism, and we talk about service, all of which are critical to being and building up the Body of Christ. But there is more to the Parable of the Talents than that. As one author notes, “There is a master who turns over to his slaves enough of his own wealth to scare half to death even the most confident Wall Street money manager.”²

Indeed, a master who gives his servants everything he’s got. Can you imagine? Preaching professor and pastor William Willimon, reminds us that, “Jesus told this story toward the end of Matthew’s Gospel. In just a couple of chapters, you know where this story will end: at the cross. On the way to the cross, Jesus tells a story about a Lord and master who called in his servants and gave them everything he had. Jesus is on his way to Calvary to give away everything he’s got.”³ What shall we say now about the risky business of living?

Well, we can say this: that God has never been one to play it safe. We can say that a God not interested in taking risks would never have risked creation in the first place. What’s more, God would never have risked relationship – first with Noah, again with Abraham, eternally with David and the people of Israel; would never have risked relationship with us. Finally, God even risked the divine self, taking human form in the incarnation, only to suffer a terrible death, only to rise again in the miracle of the resurrection.

As we move into Advent, we’ll come across those familiar texts that talk about the incarnate God “pitching a tent in our midst,” words that imply that God meant to stay a while, to be one of us, to be human, to be in relationship. And relationships are the riskiest business around because we risk ourselves.

Think about it. Relationship at any level requires that we risk for the sake of another. Loving someone is an enormous risk. Whenever I do a wedding, I always remind the couple that the public promise of fidelity is a huge risk, and not one that we should expect a person to make and keep alone. That’s why we make promises in the presence of God and the gathered community of the dearly beloved.

But we are human, and it is our nature to love, to be in relationship. And every relationship requires some risk for the sake of others. We risk loving, even though we know it may lead to loss. We risk loving enough to let go. Of course, we’re not always very good at it. I can resonate with writer Anne Lamott who said that, “Everything I’ve ever let go of has claw marks all over it.”

Being in relationship means that we will risk the pain of loss, of rejection, of unfulfillment, of sadness and despair. But it also means that we will risk for the sake of joy that can only come in relationship with another.

That very same high-risk God also came and lived among us to teach us how to be in relationship with the divine. And that’s really a risky business,

² Charles Bartow, *God’s Human Speech*, Eerdmans, 1977, p. 154.

³ William Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, November 1999, p. 29.

because being in relationship with God, whether on a personal or a communal level, means that we risk being transformed.

Theologian Fred Craddock has said, “The major themes of the Christian faith – caring, giving, witnessing, trusting, loving, hoping – cannot be understood or lived without risk.” Cannot be lived without the risk of being changed or transformed by our relationship with God. That’s the genuine risk of discipleship, that we will be different, that we will take the risk of loving, caring, giving, witnessing, trusting, hoping.

And here’s where I think the lesson of the third servant lies. He wasn’t willing to risk anything. He was too fearful of the consequences – which, remember, he couldn’t even anticipate – and, not unlike those foolish bridesmaids of last week’s Gospel lesson, he possesses a streak of passivity that eventually proves to be his undoing. All of them have forgotten the God who startles with stunning abundance. The one-talent servant reminds us that when we can’t imagine other possibilities, we tend to hoard what we have, clinging to what is comfortable or at least familiar, and we grow increasingly unwilling to take on any risk. And it’s hard even for God to bless and multiply that which we are hanging onto for dear life.

Right now, most of us are hanging on to whatever financial resources we have, in anticipation of what might happen next, even though, like the one-talent servant, we don’t know what the future will bring. And we can’t be blamed for guarding our resources. We do know that the economy will recover, of that we can be sure, even if we can’t be sure of how long it will take or the toll it will take on all of us in the meantime.

Every parish pastor I’ve talked to recently is trying to figure out just how heavily next year’s budget will be impacted by the economic downturn. We’re not alone in realizing that our proposed budget for 2009 is falling far short of the goal we set, and that the session will face some difficult choices as we move into the new year. No one wants to cut programs or mission. No one wants to lose any of the valuable staff that we currently have in place. And, God willing, we won’t get to that point any time soon. But we will have to be creative and bold in our decision-making. It is not without risk.

But notice that none of these pre-Advent parables is advising us to sit and wait passively, hoping for the best. Instead they challenge us, both individually and corporately, to faithfully explore and develop God’s gifts in our own lives and in the life of this congregation. They challenge us to embrace the risk of discipleship that calls us to greater commitment, that calls us to trust in the God who risked everything for us.

As we look ahead to a year filled with challenges in ministry and mission and budget, it’s easy to lose sight of that. Listen to William Willimon again. He writes, “Look at us gathered here this morning. We are a bunch of ordinary people, to be sure. And yet this parable says that something extraordinary has been done to us. Jesus has given us the kingdom. So now there is an

accounting, a judgment, a question – What have you done with what I have given you?”⁴

What does the Gospel ask, require and invite of all of us? By now, we know it by heart: caring, giving, witnessing, trusting, loving, hoping. And it's all risky business. Thanks to a generous and faithful God, it's all worth the risk. Amen.

⁴ Willimon, *Ibid.*