

THE GREATEST RISK OF ALL
A Sermon by
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Texts

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Matthew 25:14-30

Part of our church life as Presbyterians is to actively participate in the work of the congregation. As you know, our denomination believes that one of the ways this work is best done is through committees. Most of you in this Sanctuary have served on a committee at one time or another, if not multiple committees multiple times.

As we discern whether or not to serve on a committee, we consider what it will mean for our lives to be on that committee. We think about what day of the month it meets, the type of work that is involved, the members we will interact with and the contribution the work makes to the church. We might also consider the length of the meetings and the leadership we might be asked to offer within the committee. While there is much to consider, committing to serve on a committee is a fairly low risk obligation.

The likelihood of loss, injury or any other unwelcome circumstance to occur during your time on the committee is very slight indeed....but there is always a chance.

I think that the members of this year's Stewardship committee understand what I mean. In all of their discernment around joining the Stewardship committee, I bet that none of them considered the possibility of having to sing in front of the congregation! And yet, this morning we all enjoyed their musical composition and look forward to next week's rap. We are all glad they took this risk, even if at this moment, they are not.

Low or high, everything we do has within it some risk. What is up to us, most of the time, is the extent of risk we are willing to take.

Our parable for this morning, describes three different people's willingness to take risk as they best use the gifts entrusted to them: "For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability" (Matthew 25:14-15). For these slaves, these gifts were monetary, and each was a significant amount of money. A talent (a word that came into English language consequent of the wide circulation of this story, as a term for God-given abilities), was a monetary amount equal to about 6,000 denarii.

One denarius is a common laborer's daily wage, making one talent worth roughly 20 years wages for the average worker. Five talents is comparable to 100 years' worth of labor, an almost incomprehensible amount of money!

The Master gave these talents with confidence to the slaves and then left for a time. He gave no instructions as to what to do with his entrusted property, he just handed it over and left. As in the parable of the bridesmaids we heard last week, a key component in the story as Matthew tells is what people do while they wait. As the bridesmaids waited for the bridegroom, the slaves wait for the master. What will the slaves do with the talents entrusted them while the master is away?" What a gift, but what a responsibility! The first two slaves believed the best way to take care of the talents given them was to invest them with the hopes of doubling their amount.

This decision was incredibly risky. For the Jewish slaves, to attempt to double their money would be turning their backs on the laws of Torah. Expanded in the Mishnah and Talmud, these laws denounce every gain obtained by betting or gambling as theft.

It is not a stretch to say that the first and second slaves were gambling with their talents in hopes of gaining big: there was roughly a 1 in 100 chance that they would succeed. And yet, slave one and two felt that the risk was worth the reward.

Their master had left them with an incredible sum of money; how might they earn his respect if they double the investment given them? The warm response both slaves receive from their master, as they share the good they made on the investment, indicates the Master's approval: "Well done, good and trustworthy slave, you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things."

But what about the third slave? He was given the smallest amount of money- just one talent- but still roughly 20 years' worth of wages and an extraordinary sum. This slave kept the money entrusted to him by his Master in a very safe place while he waited for his return: he buried it. This was the appropriate action for him to take, as a Jewish man, and as a responsible worker. He ensured that the Master would get back the money he had given. This was the safe decision; one of which to be proud.

And yet, upon the master's return, the third slave is given the harshest rebuke of any one in the Bible: 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'" (Matt 25:26-30)

I find it interesting that the exchange between the third slave and the master is much more detailed and lengthy than the conversations the Master has with slaves one and two. Perhaps this is because while slaves one and two do as the Master had hoped, risking much to be rewarded even more, it is slave three who acts in a way that is the most likely. The Master's rebuke to this slave is all the more disturbing, because, it is easy to identify with the third slaves actions.

Put in a similar position, I bet many of us would act similarly. It is hard to believe that we'd do anything to bring about weeping and gnashing of teeth. What is so wrong about what slave three did, anyway?

I think the Scripture is as much about *why* he buried the money as the act of doing it. The slave's motivation for buying the money was clearly fear. Despite the Master acting with his slaves in a manner that is generous and trusting, the slave's perception of him is one who is harsh. The slave buries the money because he is afraid of what the master would do to him if he lost any of the talent. In doing so, he neglects an incredible opportunity given him. "The parable's ending warns of the tragedy of acting timidly in response to God's generosity" (2010 Stegman 313). We must not live our lives in fear.

Being a Christian- being entrusted by God with resources abundant--in our creativity, our time, our leadership abilities and our finances-is truly a high-risk venture. Offering thanks to God for these blessings and keeping them safe is not enough. In fact, such inaction is the greatest risk of all. This inaction is slothful--one of the ancient church's seven deadly sins.

Rev. John Buchanan, Pastor at Fourth Presbyterian Church describes, "Sloth means not caring, not loving, not rejoicing, not living up to the full potential of our humanity, playing it safe, investing nothing, being cautious and prudent, digging a hole and burying the money in the ground (2010 310).

There are several parts of this definition jumped out as being positive attributes for us today: playing it safe, being cautious and prudent. Does that mean that we are slothful? Not necessarily. In this particular time these actions are necessary ways of living to simply survive. And by taking these measures, sometimes the money just isn't enough. This week's issue of Time Magazine's cover has printed the question, "Can You Still Move up in America?" positioned between rungs of a ladder, the bottom one breaking as a hand tries to grab it. One of the people highlighted in the article is a young woman sitting on her bed, looking wistfully out the window on a gray day. Lesley Perez is 24, and a kindergarten teacher in New York City. She earns \$23,000 a year and lives with her parents to save money, as she continues to pay off the \$35,000 she has in student loans.

She has done all the right things, yet finds herself struggling to make ends meet, even as she works in the profession of her choice.

This is a dark time in America and for many of us who reside here. In such economic times, how do we do anything else with our money but bury it, if after all the bills there is anything left? Certainly, we save the money that we will need. This is not a time to play the market. And yet, today's Scripture still has a lesson for us. This parable is more about living than it is about money.

At the heart of this parable is how we behave as we await the return of the Lord. Like the parable of the bridesmaids, this parable describes actions of people waiting for Jesus' Second Coming. How will we wait? At the heart of this parable is instruction on how we live, how we

act responsibly as faithful people. It is this responsible action that God rewards. As John P. Meier, a Catholic priest and a professor of New Testament at the University of Notre Dame writes in his commentary of Matthew: what the Lord values "is not one's accomplishments in a quantitative sense but the fidelity of one's commitment, as mirrored in one's whole-hearted activity (2010 Stegman 311).

The question for us this morning is "How do we use the resources God has given us with freedom and hope rather than hold on them out of fear?"

First, we reflect on and talk with others-God, our family, and our friends-identifying the resources we have abundantly, that we have to share. Then, we brainstorm ways we might use those resources to help others...to be Jesus' hands and feet of compassion and care. Finally, we act on it. The hard part is that doing such actions may disturb our routines. It might require us to give up an evening in front of the tv or a lazy Saturday morning.

If you are like me, you had the experience of signing up for a volunteer experience and then somewhat dreading it. There's always something else we should be doing, or it would be so nice to stay home. I leave my home begrudgingly and return with my heart filled and feeling rejuvenated. Using our resource of time, as busy all of our lives are, can be difficult, but there really is time to do the things we want to do.

It can also be difficult to offer leadership for the church when in your profession you lead all day long. But the church needs leadership too.

The creativity and energy of all of you is what makes Northminster a vibrant, mission-oriented and faith congregation.

As Pastor Mike reminded us on Reformation Sunday, the Presbyterian Church USA and this Presbyterian Church is built on the priesthood of all of us. Working together, amazing ministry happens. We all know this...this is why we are Presbyterians. I encourage you to talk with one of our mission committee members about their work the past few months. The committee has been busy! There has been much thoughtful discussion around how to most faithfully distribute the mission funds. It has been difficult work, as everyone around the table is acutely aware that all of the organizations we contribute money to need it more now than ever, but it has been good, faithful work.

Take a risk...offer your time, your expertise or your financial resources in a new way and enjoy the reward of a life that is full and hopeful. It is not easy, but it is the adventure that God has put us on. When we risk doing God's work, we will not fail. Things may not go as we plan, but with God, something will work out. The greatest risk-and the easier choice- is to do nothing at all. Being a disciple of Jesus Christ is not about being comfortable it is an adventure...Let's go! Amen.

Bibliography

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