

“Risky Faith” – Mat 25:14-30

Perhaps you’ve noticed that now that we are past Halloween the Christmas commercials have already started on TV, and that signals the end of the year is close. The end of the church year is even closer, because this is the next-to-last Sunday in the liturgical year. The cycle of church ‘seasons’ begins with Advent two weeks from now and is followed by Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Holy Week, Easter, and the Season after Pentecost. To help acknowledge these seasons we usually follow a commonly-used set of scripture readings – called a ‘lectionary’ – that provide suggested texts for a three-year cycle. It seems in some ways as we wind down this liturgical year the gospel readings kind of taper off into a ‘pot-pourri’ of parables over the final several weeks.

However, it would be a mistake to assume these readings somehow have less importance than others in the year. We can see a pattern emerge in these parables, a pattern of addressing how the people that form the church are called to act and live while we await the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. At the same time, however, we also note that parables are often somewhat confusing and even present challenging problems to understanding.

Take for example the one we heard minutes ago, the parable of the talents. Over the years, especially with the adoption of the word ‘talents’ to mean some personal skill or capability, many if not most people have come to hear this story as being about singing, or dancing, or reciting poems or scripture, or baking cookies, or running car washes, or quilting, or any of the thousand-and-one skills that are demonstrated by the people in a congregation. As a result this parable has come to be a way to exhort and encourage people to put themselves forward, to participate in the activities of the congregation. Now that’s a noble cause, and I would exhort and encourage you as strongly as anyone to continue participating fully. But that approach to understanding this parable falls way short of its real meaning, doesn’t do adequate justice to the importance of the parable, and fails to adequately describe the difficult direction in which we are propelled in living our faith.

As we heard in the introduction to the reading, the focus of this story is financial activity. (It’s amazing how much attention is paid in Christianity to sexual stuff and how little to money stuff, given that Jesus never talked about sexuality and talked a lot about money!) The ‘talent’ referred to in the story is a great deal of money. In today’s terms, a talent is roughly equivalent to a million dollars, so the first servant got five million to invest, the second two million, and the third a paltry million. We’re not talking here about looking after the coffee fund! This is about big bucks – one could even think of a piece of property worth almost nine millions dollars!

The plot line in the parable is straight-forward enough: three servants are entrusted with a great deal of money by their master as he leaves on a long journey, how two invested wisely but the third didn’t, and how each was treated upon the master’s return. The first two doubled the money, and received praise. I guess so! Recall that the story is set in the Middle East where they didn’t have safe and guaranteed investment vehicles, although we discover that they could have placed the money with bankers and at least made a little interest (apparently it was a much better time for bankers than the global financial crisis today). But those servants obviously didn’t take that safe route, choosing instead the risky avenues available to them. Risky? You bet! Given a government that could grab inventories at will, with predators and pirates active everywhere, and without the infrastructure to support medical and transportation needs, investments in commerce were risky. Serious money could be made, but not without taking serious risks. It was not a market for faint hearts – much like today!

And that, faint hearts, brings us to the third servant. Immobilized and petrified by fear, this worthy took the safe route, burying the bucks where they would be safe from ponzi-scheme artists, sleazy investment analysts, dot-com scam artists and other predators. I think his master must have suspected him all along, because he was only given one million to work with, but he didn't even try with the amount he was entrusted with. The story is not very kind to this third servant, and neither was his master. Worse than not even doing simple with the money, like plop it into a low-yield savings account, he was dumb enough to try to put the blame back onto the master, accusing him of being a hard man. As it turns out the third servant had no idea just how hard this master was, but he quickly found out when he not only had his year-end bonus revoked but security was called and he was ushered out to the street!

With its imagery of finance this parable offers the usual set of confusions when one starts to look for meanings. For example, taking it very literally could cause you to come away hearing simply an expansion of the adage "the rich get richer and the poor get poorer" which hardly seems consistent with all the rest that Jesus had to say, especially about justice. However, when we draw back a bit from the specifics to get an overview of the parable, it becomes clearer that the issue is not merely about success or failure in investing, but offers a faith perspective about taking risks. The two who were successful were so because they took risks. The one who wasn't successful was chided for not taking a risk, for doing nothing. The implications become clearer as well: taking risks in our faith is good; not taking risks, taking the easy and comfortable way is bad.

What risks? How does this apply to us? Well, it seems too obvious to miss the call to us to take risks as we take the next steps towards redeveloping the property upon which we sit today. While the parable is not exactly about finances, just like the servants in the parable we have been handed a valuable asset from those who have preceded us in this congregation. We are faced with the choice of 'burying' that asset by simply continuing to sit on it, and also with the choice of investing the asset with the hope and expectation of returning more to our Lord. Earlier this year the congregation decided enthusiastically to pursue the latter course – to invest, and this week the Trustees have taken the step of formally acknowledging our intent to proceed. Since I post these sermons online on the website I will not go into more detail here but we will talk more on this in a few minutes.

Suffice it to say that while we have, with the help of our legal team and with what can only be considered some divine intervention, done due diligence and brought the risk to an astounding minimum – certainly low enough to satisfy our Presbytery and probably everyone here – this is still a kind of "heart-stopping" moment as we consider the magnitude of the challenges that lie before us. At the same time, this is also an energizing and hopeful moment as we consider the new opportunities for ministry and mission that can be opened up down this path, and this parable gives us renewed hope that the path of risky faith is indeed the one to follow.

It should be readily apparent from the parable that we are being exhorted to take risks, to move boldly forward, to make the investment of ourselves knowing that we will be forever changed, and to know that the change will be welcomed by our master. We can't know with any clarity what the changes will be in us as individuals, or in us as a group (that's why it's called 'risk' – if we knew exactly with total certainty what was coming there would be no risk at all!) Risk is defined as 'being vulnerable', and the parable is a reassurance that vulnerability is a good thing. It's a sad truth that those congregations who try to minimize the risk of change sooner or later find themselves turning into a seniors' tour group on a Greyhound to Ghostville, an outing into oblivion.

Change is the very essence of life and living. It is inevitable, it is an integral part, and inherent property of this magnificent creation in which we live. Despite the most ardent desires of people to avoid change, to prevent it, their sadly heroic efforts are doomed like King Canute trying to hold back the tide with a command. The very ground under our feet is constantly shifting as the continents drift slowly around the surface of the planet. Everything around us, from the planet to the weather to the government, changes constantly both short-term and long-term. We cannot stop change; furthermore we are encouraged by the parable not even to hide from it, but instead encouraged to use change to our advantage, to use change to grow. That's the essence of why the two servants are praised for being proactive, for taking steps to use what they had to grow it larger.

What kind of changes will we have to deal with as we strive to heed this scripture and take the risk to grow? Only God knows for sure, but there are some exciting possibilities out there. Frightening possibilities as well, and it seems the more likely the prospect of success at growing the more frightening the outcome looks as well. But that's OK – that's what the parable is reassuring us, that not only are we called to take the risk of growth but the results will be well worth the risk

While growth may not always be comfortable, it is always exciting. There is a sense of vigour, of being alive when participating in growth. Try this, and it doesn't work; try something else, and it does. A sense of challenge, the thrill of accomplishment, all seasoned with learning, with expanding the mind, the spirit, the body of the church. The trick is not to avoid growth, like the third servant, but to embrace it like the first two, to adapt to the changes, to use the dynamic environment to grow. The real trick is to manage the growth, to nurture and foster like plants in the garden the investments that people have made of themselves.

Growth: frightening? Yes! Exciting? Without a doubt! Risky? To be sure! But we are called and encouraged by the one who risked it all on the cross to give us the freedom to move boldly forward, risking ourselves in the growth of his kingdom, even our Lord and master, Christ Jesus.