

Sermon

“The Greatest Risk of All”

September 1st, 2019 ~ First Presbyterian Church

12th Sunday after Pentecost

Based on 2nd Peter 1:5-11 and Matthew 25:14-30

SCRIPTURES:

2nd Peter 1:5-11

⁵ For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, ⁶ and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, ⁷ and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love. ⁸ For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ For anyone who lacks these things is short-sighted and blind, and is forgetful of the cleansing of past sins. ¹⁰ Therefore, brothers and sisters, be all the more eager to confirm your call and election, for if you do this, you will never stumble. ¹¹ For in this way, entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be richly provided for you. [NRSV]

Matthew 25:14-30

¹⁴ “For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; ¹⁵ to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. ¹⁶ The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. ¹⁷ In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. ¹⁸ But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. ¹⁹ After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰ Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.’ ²¹ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ ²² And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.’ ²³ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few

things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’²⁴ Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter 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 replied, ‘You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter?’²⁷ 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.²⁸ So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents.²⁹ 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.³⁰ As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ [NRSV]

OPENING PRAYER: As we have come to your Word this day, O God, make peace in our hearts so that we may truly hear you and then follow you; for it is through our actions, our living, and our serving you that we find life abundant. We pray in the name of the Christ, and let all God’s people say ... Amen.

Playing It Safe

God creates each of us, in our own way, with a variety of gifts and abilities and talents, and throughout our lives we are often encouraged to use them and embrace them in a variety of ways. In that, we are all alike. But, many of us, in our own way, also have a knack for finding our comfort zone and wanting to remain there if at all possible. After all, it’s easier to stay in our comfort zones. It’s easier and more comfortable to be cautious. It’s easier to not take unnecessary risks. It’s easier, it often seems, to just play it safe. But, to do so means to risk not growing, not maturing, not expanding our horizons, and not living our lives as fully as possible. Which means that ultimately, perhaps the greatest risk of all is to simply play it safe and not risk anything.

Examples of Taking Risks

Here’s an example of what I’m talking about—at a church I once served, there was a young girl who had grown tall for her age, and she had developed a talent and interest for playing basketball. Her mom told me one day that this young girl

wanted to try out for the school's basketball team, *but* she was painfully shy, which made her feel even more uncertain and nervous and worried. As a good parent, her mom encouraged her to be bold and brave, and to try her best. She encouraged this young girl to reach high and dream big. Most importantly, she encouraged her to take the risk of stepping outside her comfort zone so that she could expand her horizons and live her life as fully as possible. So this young girl did—she invested herself in improving her skills and increasing her confidence, then she tried out for the team, and ... *she made it!* After that, instead of being uncertain and nervous and worried, that young girl was happy that she pushed herself and took the initiative to give it a chance, and you could tell by how she carried herself. And, her mom was happy, too, because she knew that perhaps the greatest risk of all was for her young daughter to have simply played it safe and to have not risked anything.

As parents of a daughter ourselves, Dency and I can relate to that young girl's story. Between 2011—2018, our own daughter, Nicole, attended six different schools in seven years due to how our family had moved so many times during that stretch of time from Texas to North Carolina to Georgia. And, along the way we had always encouraged her to be bold and brave, and to try her best in whatever she pursued. We encouraged her to reach high and dream big. Most importantly, we encouraged her to take the risk of stepping outside her comfort zone so that she could expand her horizons and live her life as fully as possible—whether it related to how she invested herself in her schoolwork, making new friends, singing in the church choir, auditioning for a local play, running for student council, playing volleyball, and more. As parents, we know that God has given Nicole a variety of gifts and abilities and talents, and we know that perhaps the greatest risk of all is for her to simply play it safe and not risk anything.

Fulfilling Our Baptismal Vows

In fact, as people of faith gathered together as the body of Christ in this place, we all can relate to these stories because, as a family of faith, we all watch our young people grow up around us in church, and we nurture them along the way as part of our baptismal vows to them. We watch as they create friendships, gain

new experiences, expand their horizons, push their boundaries, and discover their God-given gifts and abilities and talents and how to use them. And, through Sunday School, worship, youth group, Confirmation, and more we encourage them to be bold and brave, and to try their best in life. We encourage them to reach high and dream big in their lives. Most importantly, we encourage them to take the risk of stepping outside their comfort zones so that they can expand their horizons and live their lives as fully as possible. Because as those who have gone before them, we have learned, and we now know, that perhaps the greatest risk of all is to simply play it safe and not risk anything. And, sadly, I have seen all of this be done through the unfortunate misuse of today's gospel story from Matthew.

Parable of the Talents

We have come to know this story as the *parable of the talents*. And, for generations, people have read this story and, on the surface, assumed it should be used as a lesson about sound investment strategies, or at least about being financially responsible. As the story goes, a man, before going on a journey, summoned his servants and entrusted his property to them. To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The first two servants doubled what was given to them, but the third servant did nothing other than protect what he was given, aiming to simply return to his master what was rightfully his to begin with. But, when the master finally returns and promptly rewards the first two servants for being “good and faithful,” he not only criticizes the third servant for being lazy, he also condemns the man for being overly cautious. And, the story concludes with the cringe-worthy words, “As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Yikes! You know, a seminary professor once told my classmates and I to file this story under things we wish Jesus wouldn't have said!

It's About Living, Not Money!

But, here's the thing, as soon as we think this parable is about the value of money, we have deceived ourselves. In fact, this parable is not about sound

investment strategies or the value of money at all, but rather this story is about the type of living practiced by each servant entrusted with their master's property.

First, let's clear up what the word "talent" means here. "Talent" is from the Greek word "talanton," and it is used as a unit of measurement. But, one talent was not just one coin. In fact, a "talent" was what a laborer would earn in about 16 ½ years, and so whether we consider this in ancient terms or in today's terms, we're talking about *a lot* of money. For some quick perspective, using today's terms, if someone is making \$30,000 a year, then we are talking about almost \$500,000 after 16 ½ years. So perhaps it might have been more helpful had the Bible translators said, "A man, before going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them. To one he gave \$5 million dollars. To another, he gave \$2 million dollars. And, to a third he gave \$500,000 dollars." Now, does that change the story for you at all?

For me, a modern-day analogy to this parable is what happens in a conversation when people discuss what they might do if they ever won the lottery. People say, if I ever won the lottery, I'd give so much to charity, and so much to my church, and so much to fight cancer, and to so many additional things that truly are good and faithful and necessary. Thankfully, people tend to recognize that receiving ungodly sums of money brings with it the weight and responsibility of doing something pure and good with it. So what would you do if you were given \$5 million dollars? Or, even \$2 million? How could you change lives and change the world with a gift like that?

Being a Disciple of Jesus

In the end, the third servant did nothing wrong at all—but he didn't really do anything right either—he simply did not lose his master's money. Instead, he basically acted with the proper caution not to lose what was entrusted to him, and then he was condemned for his fearful inactivity. You see, he didn't use his God-given gifts and abilities and talents to change the world around him. He wasn't bold and brave, and he didn't try his best. He didn't reach high and dream big. Most importantly, he didn't take the risk of stepping outside his comfort zone so that he could expand his horizons and live his life as fully as possible. Because

perhaps the greatest risk of all, it turns out, is to simply play it safe and not risk anything.

No, this story is not about improper use of funds. It's not even about doubling our money and accumulating wealth. Rather, it's about what we can do through our living and our behavior. It's about being invited by God to invest ourselves deeply in being part of God's kingdom as Jesus' disciples—to live our lives as fully as possible by investing our lives in God's purposes. It's about understanding that to be a follower of Jesus the Christ, it's not so much about believing in Jesus' ideas as much as it's about doing and acting and following in Jesus' footsteps.

The Greatest Risk of All

This is how and why we nurture our young people and watch them grow. This is how and why we gather together as the body of Christ and minister to the world around us. This is how and why we spent the past week being a host church with *Family Promise*. This is how and why we are Jesus' disciples in *all the ways* that we are.

Because we must all avoid not caring and not loving and not rejoicing in God's goodness! We must use our God-given gifts and abilities and talents to change the world. We must all be bold and brave, and we must try our best. We must all reach high and dream big. And, most importantly, we must all take the risk of stepping outside our comfort zones so that we can expand our horizons and live our lives as fully as possible in God's name. Because perhaps the greatest risk of all, it turns out, is to simply play it safe and not risk anything.

So may we be emboldened to keep taking risks in the strong name of Jesus Christ! Amen.