

## THE GREATEST RISK OF ALL

Our Gospel reading this morning comes from Matthew 25:14–30. It is the Parable of the Talents. You are very likely familiar with this story from countless church school lessons as a child and if you participated in our church's New Beginnings small groups this fall, this was the Bible study in week 6 of our time together. As with any scripture we know well, I would invite you to listen with fresh ears and open hearts.

*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. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. 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." 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." 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." 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." 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; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours." 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? 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."*

Don't you wish this parable stopped at verse 29, before we hit the part about being thrown into the darkness and the weeping and gnashing of teeth? It seems a little harsh for this slave to be called worthless and thrown into the outer darkness for his poor investment abilities with his master's money.

I often wonder if this slave has gotten a bad reputation over the years. His master had entrusted him with an extraordinary amount of money. In fact, a talent is believed to have equaled about 15 years of a day laborer's wage, which in today's terms would be about a quarter of a million dollars. In the first century, burying money was common. It was considered a safe security

measure. And as we hear this story today in a time of recession, this sounds like a wise move! He wasn't a bad man. He was cautious, careful and prudent. This slave wasn't about to take any chances with that sum of money and when his master returns, he is almost proud. "See? It's all here. Every last cent. I didn't lose any of it." But the reaction of the master isn't thankful for his fiscal responsibility. He's ticked.

I have often wondered how the fate of this slave would have changed had his "goody-two shoes" friends come back empty handed. What if the first two slaves had invested poorly, bought into the high risk market, and lost it all? Would the master have been thankful and gracious towards the third slave having seen his one talent come safely home?

I wish the answer was yes. But this story isn't about fiscal responsibility. This story is about risk. And regardless of what the first two slaves come back with or don't come back with, the third slave acts out of fear and as a result risks nothing. He has been entrusted with an abundance of his master's resources, but chooses the safe route and hopes for the best.

We, too, have been entrusted with an abundance of resources.

Over 100 of you have participated in our New Beginnings conversations. For those of you who are visiting this morning or for those of you who haven't read their mail in the last three months, let me catch you up to speed on this thing called New Beginnings. Our church is at the beginning of an intentional visioning process. We are asking questions like "What does it mean to be a church in this time and place?" "What are the needs of this community and what resources do we have to help meet those needs?" "What things might we have to give up in order to grow spiritually and missionally?" They are not easy questions.

What we do know is that we have great depth when it comes to resources. We have a building. It's not perfect. It's got issues, a lot of issues. But our building is still where a Day School meets every morning and where people receive help at AA and NA meetings. Where children gather every Wednesday night and the choir practices their music. Where sardines and spotlight tag are played and where we gather here this morning in worship. We are blessed by our location – on a busy road through the center of a neighborhood community where six different schools are a stones throw from our front door. And then there are the people. You. All of you. You are teachers and engineers, military and government workers, financial advisors and lawyers, doctors and small business owners. You are mothers and fathers, grandparents, brothers and sisters. You are church school teachers and committee moderators, musicians and artists. You are cooks and bakers, prayer partners and worship leaders. The well at Bush Hill Presbyterian Church is deep.

One of my favorite parts of the New Beginnings small groups was a chart called the Missional Continuum. It is a chart with columns ranging one to five, where column one describes a church very inwardly focused and exists for the sake of itself. Column five describes something called a "missional church." It is a church that has an outward focus. Church members are trained and sent to be involved in ministry to the community. It is concerned not only about church transformation, but about community transformation. The pastor only spends a portion of his time on "church" activities and instead is expected to be an integral part of the community. The budget is flexible and allows for frequent adaptation. People from the church intentionally go into the neighborhood to build relationships and begin new ministries for the community's sake. The

church gets to know the people who use their building and go over and above to be hospitable. Change is *expected* in a column five church.

As we have been sifting through the information that has poured in from these small group discussions, we, fairly unanimously, have said our church is somewhere between a column two and three. But over and over again groups said, “We really aren’t motivated to move to a column 5; we would be more comfortable with a column 4.” I was surprised by this reaction. So I went back to the chart to see what was the dramatic shift between column four and column five. Column four describes a very healthy church. Its systems run smoothly, outreach is thriving, people are nourished, there are opportunities for discipleship and ministry, people from the community attend our programs and events, and the church is a bustle every day of the week with activity. It is the church we have dreamed to be. The difference between a column four church and a column five church is that a column four church still requires the community to come inward in order to be nourished—and a column five church requires the church to go outward in order to nourish the community.

My wise husband and I were talking about this at dinner one night a few weeks ago and he said a very profound comment, “A column four church is a really healthy church today, but if a church wants to exist in 25 years, it has to become a column five church.”

And friends, this requires risk.

Our parable this morning is told in the midst of Jesus’ high risk time. Jesus has left Galilee, where we have heard about all the crowds of followers, to go to Jerusalem where he was a threat to the political powers. This story is embedded in the Holy Week narrative—somewhere between Palm Sunday and Good Friday. This isn’t about *Jesus* risking it all though. The master, Jesus, goes to his servants and says, “I am going away. Here is my property. I trust you with it.” He does not leave instructions or a detailed five year plan. He hopes his disciples have learned enough to know what to do with these resources.

It turns out in this parable that the greatest risk of all is, in fact, not to risk anything—to play it safe, to live cautiously and prudently, to dig a hole and bury the money in the ground. To be more concerned about preservation than about transformation. And Jesus warns about the consequences of playing it safe – of not investing ourselves, of not risking anything, of not fully living. It is like death, like being banished in the outer darkness.

So often we allow faith to be our own personal comfort zone. We make faith about living a good life by avoiding bad choices. We make going to church a pretty low-risk endeavor. But Jesus invites us to be disciples. To be the care-takers, or stewards, of his resources. To live our lives as fully as possible by investing them, by taking risks, and by expanding our level of comfort when it comes to our understanding of church. It is not just about believing in him, but following him boldly. We have been given such an opportunity, complete with a well of resources. What will be our faithful response? Amen.