

Nov. 15, 2020 Pentecost 24A

Matthew 25:14-30

Be Risky

Last fall Brenda and I were hiking along the Rum River up north of St. Francis. At one point in our hike, I glanced behind us and saw either a very large coyote or a small wolf about 100 yards behind us. He seemed to be following us. We stopped in the trail and made a bunch of noise and he eventually wandered off. But not before raising my blood pressure to exhilarating levels.

I have seen Timber wolves at Como Zoo. I've gotten within a few feet of them. But they were in a nice strong cage. There was no rise in my blood pressure. No exhilaration. No risk. Looking at caged animals isn't nearly as exhilarating as witnessing a wild animal in its natural habitat—it's too safe, it's too tame, and it's too predictable.

I remember Jesus telling His disciples at one point, *"I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves."*

And I wonder if perhaps we spend too much time making ourselves safe and tame and predictable. We try to remove the danger, remove the risk. We attempt to tame people in the name of Christ. I wonder if the same Jesus who died to make us eternally safe didn't also die to make us risk takers—to make us spiritually dangerous.

Today's parable of the faithful stewards points us toward risk. Let me start with a common question from personality inventories. What would you do if you knew you couldn't fail? You would try something pretty risky, right? After all, if you knew you wouldn't fail, why try something easy? What risky thing would you do? Would you write the Great American Novel or sail around the world? Would you tell someone, "I love you," or would you find the courage to leave? Would you go back to school to finish that degree or would you call your mother or father and say, "I'm sorry for the pain I caused you. When can we get together again?"

If failure were not an option, human history would have been marked with more bold attempts at both greatness and villainy. Failure is all too real and many bold plans have never gotten past the stage of dreams.

There are all kinds of risks and all kinds of rewards, but there is a common reason why we are naturally risk averse—fear. Fear is a natural, healthy

reaction that can keep you safe. Healthy fear of fire prevents you from getting burned. Unhealthy fear of fire can also keep you from enjoying the simple pleasure of making your own s'mores on a campfire.

There has to be a balance between fear and reward. Those with no fear fill our cemeteries at an early age. At the other extreme, too much fear is unhealthy and paralyzing. Fear keeps hope locked in a room of doubt.

Great ships were not built to cling to the coastline. They were created to cross oceans. Few great discoveries were made by playing it safe. There is also no risk-free way to fall in love or to raise children. And there is no risk-free way to mend broken relationships and make amends for past hurts. Christian author John Ortberg says, *"Fear and growth go together like macaroni and cheese. It's a package deal. The decision to grow always involves a choice between risk and comfort."*

In our Gospel reading for this morning, Jesus tells a parable of risk and rewards and the responsibility that comes with great gifts. In the parable, a very wealthy landowner entrusts his servants with vast sums of money. A talent was a measure of gold worth roughly fifteen years' wages for a day laborer. The life expectancy of the time for common laborers was such that making it to forty was never a sure thing, even though many lived longer. Fifteen years' wages was more than half of what you might expect to make in a lifetime—maybe all you hoped to make in a lifetime. Each talent in this parable is that kind of wealth.

The master gives one servant five talents, another two, and the last a single talent. Now, this is where the parable gets hard to hear. The problem is that we have a word, "talent," that means "ability" or "skill". Singing, for example, is a talent. So, when we hear of a servant given one talent and another given five talents, it sounds like we are talking about abilities or skills, and then the parable immediately sounds different.

This is not a coincidence. Our English word, "talent," comes to its current meaning through the preaching of the Middle Ages. In that time, when the English language as we know it was being forged, this parable was being preached. In preaching the story, congregations were told how these servants were given these large sums of money to watch over for their master. As the preaching went on through the centuries, it became easier to directly see the talents in this parable representing God's gifts to us, posing the question, "What have you done with the talents God entrusted to you?" This created the meaning of our word, in which "talent" refers to our God-given gifts and abilities.

For the first hearers of the parable, it was clear that it was large sums of money with which the master entrusted his servants. The one in whom the master put the greatest trust made a vast sum of money, but to do so, he had to put at risk seventy-five years' wages for a day laborer. If his plan for using the money entrusted to him failed, that servant could never have hoped to pay back his master.

The parable tells of three persons entrusted with great responsibility. Even the one who was given the care of a single talent was entrusted with much. Each of them would have to risk much if they wanted to show a return on investment.

In the parable, the first two servants doubled the master's money. Each was rewarded with more money. Not money for themselves; they didn't get a big payday. Each was given more money to invest for their master. The reward for faithfulness was more responsibility. Then came that fateful last servant. He, not too diplomatically, tells the master, "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."

This last servant risked nothing. He took what was entrusted to him and hid it. It was safe. There was little risk in digging a hole and hiding the loot. There was also no potential gain. And for not taking any risk with the money entrusted to him, the servant gets the worst possible punishment as his reward.

Jesus taught that the heart of the Good News is love. Our world was created for love, which means the freedom to do great evil as well as good. There is no other way. God gave us choices and through our choices, we can get hurt and we can hurt others. A universe where real love is an option is a risky place, as pain and suffering are not only possible, but likely. And yet, this world of choice founded on love is also what makes possible all the noble acts of self-sacrifice. This world is not only a world of pain and suffering, but also a world of generosity, kindness, and self-sacrificial love.

C. S. Lewis wrote these words after the death of his wife:

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it

will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable.

God invested so much love in you through Jesus' life and ministry, his death and resurrection. You can never repay that love. The good news is that you don't exactly have to pay Jesus back, as much as pay it forward. God is not looking for a return on investment in quite the same way as the hard landowner in the parable. Jesus calls on a muscular faith that is put to work and so grows stronger.

At the heart of this parable is really faith and trust that when we step out in faith, God will not leave us alone. This is like the Apostle Peter asking if he can walk out on the water to join Jesus. Jesus calls him out of the boat. This is Peter stepping out in faith. But once on the waves, with his whole life at risk, Peter is paralyzed by fear and begins to sink. Then Jesus rescues Peter. Christ was with him on the water; he couldn't fail.

Living the Gospel always involves risk. Risk is inherent in saying, "I love you," or in asking for forgiveness, or in offering to reconcile with someone who hurt you. God has shown you great love and asks only that you share that love with others. When you take the risk to love, it is the grace of God working through you that does the heavy lifting. Living into the love of God happens through concrete actions toward others as we give as we have been given, and forgive as we have been forgiven.

How might you share the love of God with someone today? Who do you need to ask for forgiveness? Who do you need to forgive? In whom might you invest the love that God has shown you? What would you risk for love if you knew you couldn't fail?