

“Risks Worth Taking”**OT 33A-17****1 Thessalonians 5: 1-11****Matthew 25: 14-30****November 19, 2017****Risks Worth Taking”**

Ouch. Now that’s a tough parable. Invest what you’ve got and make it grow... or you’ll live in the outer darkness?

Seems overly harsh. Certainly hyperbolic. But we have to remember... Jesus tells this parable from *within* Jerusalem. *Within* the very place he and the disciples had been heading towards the past three years. Which means... these are the penultimate days of Jesus’ life. In three days, he’ll be dead. His time on earth is coming to a close, and he knows it. It’s why he’s only been in Jerusalem for a couple days and already he’s confronted every religious elite there was to confront, and spoken truth to almost every political authority he encountered. Time was running out to start the revolution he’d been journeying towards Jerusalem to instigate.

So when we explore this parable, friends, we need to note this isn’t just another one of Jesus’ parable. This one has “urgent,” written all over it. It’s the next to last parable he’ll ever tell. And Jesus tells it, quite frankly, because he needs to know, with his life coming to a close, that the kingdom he came to reveal will keep being revealed amid the ministry of his disciples. He needs to know that his followers won’t take the gifts of love and grace and compassion he’s revealed to them, and just bury them in the dirt, alongside their grief once he’s gone. So he tells them this parable about a master and slaves... and the important of investing and using the gifts you’re given, rather than simply keeping them for yourself or storing them away.

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Of course, he doesn’t say it that way. Parables are intended to make us think through their layers, drawing us into the truths we find along the way. So as we read, Jesus tells his followers about three slaves who are each given talents by their master before the master goes away on a trip. Now, these talents weren’t special qualities... like singing well. A talent was a huge sum of money, equivalent to 15 years’ worth of wages for the average daily laborer. To one, the master gives 5 talents, to another, 2, and to the last, 1. The first two slaves go and invest what their master had given them—we don’t know where or how they invested, only that they did something with their talents. And in the process, they end up doubling their master’s money. So upon his return, the master rejoices with his slaves, praises them for their good and faithful work, and invites them “into the joy of your master.”

The third slave, though... he didn’t want to invest the talent the wrong way and end up losing even one part of it. So he buried it. That way, when the master returned, he’s able to dig it up, wipe it off, and proudly give it right back to the master. “Here it is. All there. I didn’t lose a single penny.” he says proudly. But the master is furious... perhaps not so much that he didn’t make any money, but because the slave chose to do nothing—nothing—with this amazing gift he’d been given.

Point being... what we do with our gifts matters. The way we spend our precious time in this world... the way we engage the blessings we have... the way we invest our resources and even ourselves... it's all essential to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Which is why Jesus tells this parable so close to his death. For he knows that if his disciples just sit on their hands and fail to use the gifts he's revealed to them... if they refuse to invest the love and grace they've come to experience... then the kingdom he was spending his life to give wouldn't make it past that first generation of followers, let alone to you and to me. So take what you've been given and use it, Jesus says. Invest it. Don't be afraid to risk it... For some risks, no matter how great, are simply worth taking.

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My grandparents tried to teach my brother and me a similar lesson when I was about 18. They gave us both \$4000—a heckuva gift, right? It was by far and away the biggest gift I'd ever received. And I was ecstatic... for all of about 30 seconds. Because immediately upon giving us the check, my grandparents also gave us strict instructions that this money was to be invested. It was my grandparents' way of introducing us to the world of financing and investment.

So I took my grandparents gift and faithfully obliged by their terms. I researched various areas of investment. And, this being in the mid 90's, I decided that the tech field was where I wanted to invest. So I contacted a broker, we had a conversation, and then she sent me a risk-assessment questionnaire to gauge my comfort with risk. It was my first introduction into the relationship between risks and investments. I'd never before been confronted with the notion that if you invest conservatively, you don't risk losing much, but you won't gain much, either. While if you invest more daringly, you may make a lot, but you might lose a lot, too.

So I decided on a rather aggressive, more risky portfolio, investing in diversified mutual funds, but all within the tech field.

Now... all you investors out there, don't laugh. That's what I did.

I *wish*... I *wish* I'd followed my brother's example. He told our grandparents, "Thank you very much," upon receipt of the money and their strict instructions to invest it... and then he proceeded to go and spend it on whatever made his heart happy.

And I'm here to tell you, between the two of us, he was the wiser. He spent the money on things he needed or wanted. While four years later... just four years later, my investments were worth the great and grand total of \$40. They hadn't just performed poorly... they'd done miserably. All of it... gone.

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So when I encounter this parable about the landowner and slaves and their call to invest their talents, I can't help but lament a bit for the third slave, you know? The one who decided investing the talent is just too risky.

Like so many of you, I've been burned by risk. And not just financial risk... but all kinds, really. Relational risk... vocational risk... even spiritual risk.

I suspect it's something we've all learned along the way... That engaging in risk inherently makes us vulnerable to loss. And who likes loss? Loss scares us. Heck... just the feeling of vulnerability scares us half to death.

But according to Jesus, we can't let fear stand in our way of investing what we have. For it was fear that sabotaged the third slave, right? It was fear, not prudence, that prevented him from using the gifts the master had given him. Just as it was fear, not lack of ability, that prevented him from risking growth.

Listen again to the words of the third slave.

"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.

"I was afraid... Here you have what is yours.

"I was afraid you'd be mad if I messed up...

"I was afraid I'd look foolish if I failed..."

"I was afraid you wouldn't forgive me ...

"I was afraid I'd lose some of it. So here, have what is yours.

"I was afraid."

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Friends, Jesus shares this urgent parable precisely at this point in his life because he understood better than any of us just how much there is to fear in this world. And yet... still... even there, standing three days out from the cross... he insists that it is worth investing all that we have and all that we are in the kingdom of God within and around us. He insists:

Helping the hungry find food is worth the risk.

Helping the refugees find peace is worth the risk.

Helping the outcast and the isolated find belonging is worth the risk

Helping the grieving find hope is worth the risk.

Helping the ashamed find grace is worth the risk.

Helping the troubled find peace is worth the risk.

It's all worth the risk of loss, Jesus says. It's worth the risk of rejection... it's worth the risk of failure because that's the way the kingdom of God on earth grows... when you and I and those who count ourselves among Jesus' followers invest whatever we can in the work he has called us to do.

Really, it's an essential part of the revolution Jesus went to Jerusalem to instigate in the first place. A revolution where people understand they're blessed by God not simply for themselves, but so that they might be a blessing unto others. That the gifts God gives us aren't just for us... but are intended, in truth, for the common good.

So let's just be open and transparent about it. The Christian understanding of stewardship is a risky one. There is inherent risk in our claim to follow Jesus. Which is why, if we're willing to be honest, there've been times... far too many times we've failed to invest ourselves in the people and places and causes we should. Too many times we've buried our gifts... too many times we've silenced our voices... too many times we've clung to our money... too many times we've avoided issues that might make us uncomfortable... because the issue is seen as too political... or too controversial...

We've all fallen short of the risks God calls us to take. I certainly know I have.

But Towson Presbyterian Church, let me tell you something. One of the reasons I fell in love with you now well over a year ago when I was talking with the Pastor Nominating Committee, is because I saw in you a church community that isn't afraid of taking risks. I saw a community that isn't afraid of investing in the people and causes and ministries to which God is calling you.

For I know the risk you took to join the Covenant Network, and to boldly, prophetically, clearly take a stand on the side of inclusion for all in the church. Though it wasn't easy at the time, what a beautiful and prophetic platform this community now stands on—declaring that we do, indeed, welcome all—regardless of orientation or circumstance.

I also know you took a risk a few years ago when you made the Sunday Community Lunch a central mission of our outreach. I know it took real guts and faith for so many to commit to investing so much of yourselves in a ministry for people you didn't yet know, but still, knew they needed you. And now, Sunday Community Lunch stands as a ministry that not only feeds the food insecure once a week, but also offers a beautiful witness to what hunger ministry can look like.

And still, there are others risks that now stand as testimony to what can happen when we invest ourselves and the gifts we've been given in the kingdom of God within and around us.

Food for Thought, and backpacks that will go to impoverished youth to ensure they don't go hungry throughout the weekend.

Annual trips to Honduras, with medical and dental clinics for some of the world's most impoverished.

Small Group dialogues and ministries... including an important upcoming conversation on race and multicultural relations.

And today, we will celebrate in a special way this church's investment in caring for creation... and the tremendous work many accomplished this summer amid their investment in our Intergenerational Garden.

It's all testimony to what can happen when we invest in the kingdom of God within and around us.

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But even as I lift this up, Towson Presbyterian Church, I also want you to know... in fact, I need you to know, there is still so much more to which we are called. There are still so many more ministries to explore... more people to reach... more grace to give... more love to invest... more risks to take.

But to do so... to grow more... to reach further... to make a bigger difference... we all need to live into the revolution of risk Jesus started 2000 years ago... and invest ourselves—our time, our talents, and yes—our treasure—into the ministries of Towson Presbyterian Church.

I list all three—time, talent, and treasure—because all three are essential investments we're called to make.

And yet... it's that third one that we often have the hardest time talking about, right? Money. But here's the thing. We shouldn't have a hard time talking about it. For money's not a bad thing. Nor is it inherently a good thing. Rather, Jesus tells us that what matters with money

is the way we use it. Do we hoard it, or do we invest it? Do we view it as ours and ours alone, or do we buy into Jesus subversive revolution... and see ourselves as blessed to be a blessing?

Friends, I believe Towson Presbyterian Church is worth our investment. So I sincerely ask you to take, if you're able, a step beyond what you may have previously committed in years past. Make your pledge a bit... well... risky if you can. Not that I want you to go into debt or choose between your pledge and your mortgage or anything of the sort. That's not it at all.

But as the great Presbyterian pastor John Buchanan once said, when it comes to kingdom life, "the greatest risk of all, it turns out, is not to risk anything, not to care deeply and profoundly enough about anything to invest deeply, to give your heart away and in the process risk everything."¹

It's why he calls Christian discipleship "a high risk venture."

And it is. Discipleship is a high risk venture. Who else, other than disciples of Jesus, would believe that the way to live life most fully is to give it away?

Amen.

¹ John M. Buchanan in Pastoral perspective article on Matthew 25: 14-30 in *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 4* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 310.