

“Faithful Risks”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
November 15, 2020

Matthew 25: 14-30

Right now, we are living through a time that feels full of risk. With the exponential growth of Covid-19 cases in our state and country, it seems that going about our daily lives has become ever more-riskier. If we forget just once to put on our mask or to stay distanced from others, we might unknowingly be infected – or infect someone else.

Some in our community are choosing to ignore the risk, not believing it is no more of a threat to our livelihood. If you are one of those people, I hope this fact will change your mind: this week, hospitals in the Indianapolis area began transferring patients to facilities outside of the metro area, because they have reached their capacity. If you have to go to the hospital, you may end up in Bloomington or Muncie or Fishers or Noblesville. And it’s only getting worse. The risk is real, and it requires all of us to do our part to keep ourselves and one another safe.

There are times in life, though, other than a pandemic, when making a risky decision is not solely about life-and-death. It might involve leaving a job you’ve had for many years to pursue a dream you’ve always held. It might be an organization shifting its focus dramatically from its past, in order to meet challenges it is currently facing. Making a risky decision is not popular, rarely seems like a logical decision, and takes an incredible amount of confidence. Sometimes that risk leads to great rewards, and we are emboldened to take such a risk again. Sometimes that risk leads to failure, and we are left to wonder if we should consider such a risk ever again. But more than anything, taking a risk signifies possessing faith: faith that no matter what happens, this is what is needed to build a healthier situation.

The parable of the talents is an example of Jesus teaching his disciples the importance of not just preaching the faith, but living it. When we hear the term “talent,” we often think of what that means in our modern language – the gifts and abilities we have as individuals. But truthfully, this parable is about money – pure and simple. For as we read at the beginning of the passage: “The man summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them” (25:14). This isn’t a story about how to make more of your volunteer hours and skills; this is a story Jesus tells to say what is expected by God of how we will utilize the monetary gifts God has blessed us with.

To truly appreciate in modern terms what this parable is saying, first consider what any investment manager will tell you today. If you are seeking to double your invested money, and you recognize the inherent

risks in attaining that goal, he or she will speak of the Rule of 72. If your investment has a guaranteed interest rate of five percent, you divide the interest rate into 72, and the answer will be the number of years it will take to double your money. Five percent into 72 equals fourteen and a half years. If you wish to double your money faster than that, the risk increases dramatically (John Buchanan, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2011: 308-312)

Now, consider the fact that in Jesus' day, each talent would have been the equivalent of approximately 15 years of earnings by a day laborer. Fifteen years! That is the smallest amount of money which the slaves were given to manage. The other amounts were even larger – mind-boggling to those who heard Jesus tell this story. The master was incredibly trusting and generous in what he left for each of his slaves to manage. And to each, they were given an amount “according to his ability.” The master knew what their “talents” were in assigning each of them five, two, and one “talent.” The only question left to answer was: what would each of them do?

The first slave greets his master and says, “Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.” That slave went to the investment manager and with high risk, created 150 years' worth of wages. The second slave greeted his master by taking his two talents and doubling the total; the 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: (25:20-23).

And then there's the poor guy who was given one talent. I appreciate John Buchanan's description of this slave:

The third slave takes a very different approach with his money, his one talent. He digs a hole in the ground and puts all the money in the hole for safe-keeping. In a time of stock-market decline, this man looks very wise.

This is not a bad man. This is a prudent, careful, cautious investor. He is not about to take chances with the money. It is all there, every penny of it, when his master returns. “Here it is. All of it, safe and sound.” For his efforts he is treated as harshly as anyone in the whole Bible.

Buchanan continues: *I cannot help wondering how it would have turned out if the first two slaves had put the money in a high-risk venture and lost it all. Jesus did not tell it that way, but I cannot but imagine that the master would not have been harsh toward them, and might even have applauded their efforts. The point here is not really about doubling your money and accumulating wealth. It is about living. It is about investing. It is about taking risks. It is about Jesus himself and what he has done . . .*

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. The greatest risk of all, it turns out, is to play it safe, to live cautiously and prudently. Orthodox, conventional theology identifies sin as pride and egotism. However, there is an entire other lens through which to view the human condition. It is called sloth, one of the ancient church's seven deadly sins. Sloth means not caring, not loving, not rejoicing, not living up to the full potential of our humanity, playing it safe, investing nothing, being cautious and prudent, digging a hole and burying the money in the ground (ibid).

This parable is Jesus' way of saying to us: "You cannot follow me in isolation and fear. You have to be in relationship with one another; you have to trust me and know I will be with you; you have to believe you cannot figure it all out by yourself, but can only live within my presence. For when you take risks, you will be rewarded. When you step out in faith, you will see amazing things. When you give up control, and admit you need more than yourself to live life, then you will experience the fullness of my love for you."

Several years ago, I read of a church in suburban Cleveland, Ohio, which actually followed-through with this parable. The pastor gave to each of the members in attendance a \$50 bill, and the kids were given a \$10 bill. It was a church of 1700 members - that's right: the pastor handed out a total of \$40,000. Many thought he was nuts. Others found it to be inspirational. After several weeks, the church members brought the "talents" they had accumulated. Their investment of talents netted \$40,000 - double the initial \$50 and \$10 given to the members. That money was divided between three missions of the church, both locally and internationally, and a spirit of excitement permeated that congregation ("Pastor's Challenge Shocks Congregation," Helen O'Neill, Associated Press, December 22, 2007).

And in past years, I have put this into practice with the children of our church - giving them \$10 each and challenging them to invest their talents to see how they might be expanded. It's been exciting and encouraging to see how this has stretched and expanded the perspective of our children and their families, so that they realize what they have is God's, gifts that are entrusted to them to expand and utilize for God's kingdom. And no, I'm not handing out \$50 bills today to everyone! But imagine how you would react if someone did. What would you do? Would you take a faithful risk with that talent that was entrusted to you?

John Buchanan concludes: *Now for most of us, religion, our personal faith, has not seemed like a high-risk venture. In fact, it has seemed to be something like the opposite. Faith has seemed to be a personal comfort zone. Faith, many of us think, is about personal security, here and in the hereafter. Faith, we think, is no more risky than believing ideas in our heads about God and Jesus, a list of beliefs to which we more or less subscribe intellectually. Faith . . . is getting our*

personal theology right and then living a good life by avoiding bad things. Religion, we think, is a pretty timid, non-risky venture.

Here Jesus invites us to be his disciples, to live our lives as fully as possible by investing them, by risking, by expanding the horizons of our responsibilities. To be his man or woman, he says, is not so much believing ideas about him as it is following him. It is to experience renewed responsibility for the use and investment of these precious lives of ours. It is to be bold and brave, to reach high and care deeply (ibid).

What are we willing to invest as followers of Jesus Christ? In this pandemic time, our natural instinct is to protect ourselves from risk – indeed, I believe God has given us brains to know what to do to stay safe and keep one another safe. But the natural tendency is to then retreat into fear, to isolate ourselves emotionally and spiritually from God and one another, and to bury our faith in the ground.

So, what are we willing to invest as followers of Jesus Christ? Will we take a risk and be hopeful in the face of hopelessness? Will we take a risk and be compassionate in the face of judgment? Will we take a risk and be transparent with our emotions even if that opens us up to potential pain and woundedness? Will we take a risk and trust that we will have enough – enough money, enough support, enough love – to give freely and joyfully, even in the face of the world saying we'll never have enough?

Being a follower of Christ today is risky business. But it is not unmitigated risk; it is risk which is supported by faith. May we have the courage to respond in faith to the call of our Lord.

Thanks be to God. Amen.