

November 12, 2017
The Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost

“Risky Business”
by *Mary Anne Biggs*

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 ~ Matthew 25:14-30

Our reading from Matthew this morning is one of three teachings near the end of his gospel ... near the cross ... where Jesus talks about accountability. These parables of Jesus suggest that our ends are in God's hands ... but also in ours, at least in part.

In all honesty, I struggled with even writing a sermon this week. It was a deep blow to my soul, as I'm sure it was for you, to hear the devastating news of yet another mass shooting. No one expects their church to become the target of an attack ... especially not the kind of spare-no-one shooting that took place last Sunday at a Southern Baptist church in a small rural town just outside of San Antonio. I was aghast that a gunman shot nearly 50 worshipers ... 26 fatally ... more than a dozen of them children ... a baby only 18 months old. 50 worshippers ... a figure that nears the total attendance at First Baptist Church of Sutherland Springs many weeks. For survivors and their neighbors, it's the kind of unimaginable tragedy that will change their small single-stoplight town forever.

I found myself overwhelmed with struggling ... struggling with gun violence and so much more ... struggling to understand the racial injustice that permeates so much of our culture and the structures that support our daily life ... struggling with our response to the refugee crisis ... struggling with a disregard for the health and safety of those on the margins ... struggling with the endless wars that ravage our planet ... struggling with our own family and community conflicts, to mend fences and heal broken hearts. For me to struggle and focus only on guns is to miss the depth of my vocation. Yet, guns and access are keys to the challenges we face again and again. Just last Sunday we were reminded of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. Listen to Martin Luther words, “We must not kill, either by hand, heart, or word, by signs or gestures, or by aiding and abetting.” “Aiding and abetting” ... what does that mean for us? Does it mean that we are convicted by our silence ... or by doing the very least we can do?

Doing the very least we can do ... that's the story behind this parable in Matthew's gospel, isn't it? In the parable, this rich man goes on a journey and entrusts his wealth to his stewards. He gives one five talents. He gives another two talents. He gives the third a single talent. The "talent" in this parable is a monetary measurement of the Hellenistic world. The talent was no small sum of money. It was a silver coinage weighing somewhere between fifty-seven and seventy-four pounds. It was worth six thousand denarii, a denarius being an average day's wage. So, think of a talent as about 23 years of a common person's earnings. Even the person with one talent starts with a lot.

The steward with five talents works the wealth into ten talents. The steward with two talents works the wealth into four talents. And when this man returns, he rewards them both identically: *"Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful in a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Enter into the joy of your master."* The identical reward reminds us that we are not held accountable for the quantities but the qualities of our lives ... that we are not judged by what we had to begin with ... but by what we do with what we have ... that God does not compare us to each other ... only to ourselves. It also means there is no one who can do nothing for God.

But there are many who do just that ... nothing at all. The other steward has one talent. What does he do? He digs a hole and buries it. Well, this was a common form of banking in those days, mind you ... before locks and safes and a gun in every hand. It was primitive, but actually, it was considered good stewardship in those days to guard a treasure and return it unaltered. So, when this rich man comes to make an accounting, the servant says, *"I knew you were a harsh fellow, reaping what you didn't sow and harvesting where you didn't plant, so I was afraid and buried your treasure. Here's what you gave me in the first place, unused and unharmed."* He expects a reward. The original hearers of this parable would expect that he would be rewarded. But this rich man said, *"You wicked and lazy goof! (This is a loose translation!) You knew that I was harsh and demanding, and you didn't even invest the money in a long-term CD. Take that talent and give it to one with ten, and throw this goof into the outer darkness, where there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth."*

It doesn't seem fair at first blush. And if this is supposed to be a picture of God, what is Jesus telling us? That God has entrusted us with life and left us to our own devices until the day of reckoning? God as an absentee owner? Is Jesus saying that God is harsh and judgmental ... reaping what God did not sow and harvesting where God didn't plant? Well, the Landlord did turn out to be as small and mean as the one talent slave imagined ... but then again, the five-talent and the two-talent slaves imagined him to be generous and rewarding. And so, to them, he was. What if the God you get is just the God you imagine? Small and mean and harsh and hateful ... if that's how you imagine God ... or big and generous and joyful and loving, with a love great enough to include everybody ... even you?

It seems to me that this parable is about the tension between fear and risk. Simply put, our worst human behaviors are motivated by fear. Fear divides us. Fear reduces us. Fear paralyzes us. It keeps us from taking the risks that faith calls from us. It leads us to bury what God has given us and to do nothing at all. The two-talent servant and the five-talent servant both trusted the Landlord from the beginning ... that even if they had made some mistakes ... even if they had lost ... that the Landlord would honor their efforts. They acted out of faith, but the one-talent slave acted out of fear. And fear is the worst motivator of all. As Barbara Brown Taylor suggests:

Fear is a small cell with no air in it and no light. It is suffocating inside and dark. There is no room to turn around inside it. You can only face in one direction, but it hardly matters since you cannot see anyhow. There is no future in the dark. Everything is over. Everything is past. When you are locked up like that, tomorrow is as far away as the moon.

What are we afraid of? Are we afraid of what people might think? Are we afraid of what people might say? Are we afraid of failing? Or are we afraid of succeeding ... and what then? Perhaps we are afraid of change. They say all change, even change for the good, is experienced as loss. Perhaps we are afraid of God. And according to Jesus' parable, we should be. Only we should not be afraid of God so that we risk nothing. We should be afraid of not risking ... not acting ... not laying ourselves on the line for God's sake.

What have you buried out of fear? Some dream you decided was beyond you? Some hope you have given up waiting to be realized? Some future that is better than the past? Some ability you don't know you have because you've been afraid to even try? What has God placed in your hands ... and what does God want you to do with it for God's sake? What are you doing for God with what God has given you? What are we doing for God with what God has given us as a church? God doesn't call us to be successful ... God calls us to be faithful.

But, according to this parable, being faithful means taking risks. I like Fred Craddock's observation ... *The major themes of the Christian faith - caring, giving, witnessing, trusting, loving, hoping - cannot be understood or lived without risk.* Laughter is a risk. So are tears. We encounter risk any time we give our heart to something ... or someone. Faith is a risky business.

What does it mean to risk yourself for God? How do you make spiritual investments? I think it's about being fully engaged in doing God's work. It's about using what we have and who we are to extend God's loving domain in the real world ... not just in our talk and thought and feeling. It's especially about personally and corporately caring for the hungry, the thirsty, the estranged, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned ... and all those Jesus describes as "the least of these." It's about risking the unpopularity that comes from being subversive to the chapter and verse of popular culture. It's about risking confrontation with what the Bible calls "the principalities and powers" by confronting them openly with a clear Christian conscience. For many of us it's about letting our current leadership know that if they continue to act as pawns of the gun lobbies ... and refuse to enact saner gun laws ... then we will rise up and elect leadership who will. It's about letting go of our fears and our excuses ... and our blaming and our convenient rationalizations ... and risking beyond our comfort zones to let God stretch us into being kingdom people first of all ... and most of all ... and all the time. In short, it's about putting our money and time and talent ... and energy and engagement ... in the real world. It's about being all in for God.

But you know, I kind of wish Jesus had told the story another way, because it's what I see happening so much in our time. Imagine the one talent slave risking it all and gaining it all. But the five-talent slave buries his talents and does everything he can out of fear to keep from losing any of his wealth. I wonder, what will the Landlord say to all the five-talent people in our time who have buried their talents ... held back in fear ... refused to share ... refused to care ... refused to get involved and held everything for themselves? I imagine the teeth-gnashing will be unbearable on the day the Landlord audits them, don't you?

This parable is also a word about faith as faithfulness ... as "a long obedience in the same direction," to use my favorite phrase from Nietzsche. Because as sad as it is to leave our gifts

buried ... it is sadder still to see them frittered away on uselessness. But in this day of fast food, rapid transit, and high-speed internet access, we are more interested in instant gratification than faithfulness. Faithfulness is ... submerging ourselves ... harnessing ourselves ... to a work that is real ... to something useful ... to something beautiful for God.

Every time some hungry soul is fed ... every time some sorrowing heart is given new hope ... every time a group of people meet God here and are lifted higher ... it is thanks to the saints who committed themselves to God's work right here. Thanks to them! And what might happen on this corner of 1st and Division streets ... fifty years from now ... thanks to us? Can you imagine what a committed band of people might do if they were willing to lay everything on the line to accomplish the mission of loving God and loving people and connecting people with God?

Here it is in a nutshell ... risk it all, all the time, for God ... and you will gain it all, all in God's good time ... more grace than you started with ... and the everlasting joy of the Landlord, who is the Lord. You know, that's exactly what Jesus did. That's exactly what Jesus did. Think about that as you return your pledge cards this morning ... remember the life, death and resurrection of the One who was "all in" ... for all of us.

Leave this world a better place for having been here. And someday, you will hear God say, "Well done, good and faithful servant.

May we pray?

O God, our Creator, our Owner, our Landlord,
Thank you for the immeasurable abundance you have placed in our hands. Open our eyes to see they are not just for us to enjoy, but a means to your ends ... that through our gifts we might be formed into loving souls and others might be embraced in the circle of your care. As we receive your gifts, show us how and where we might invest this grace to your glory, in the name of Christ. Amen.