

Risk Taking Without Quaking
First Presbyterian Church
Pittsford, NY 14534
November 16, 2014
23rd Sunday After Pentecost
Lectionary Passages:
Judges 4:1-7
Psalm 123
1 Thessalonians 5:1-11
Matthew 25:14-30

1. Our church mission statement says we are a caring community, growing spiritually as disciples of Jesus Christ.
 - a. Together we spread the good news of Jesus through worship, fellowship, education, prayer and especially mission.
 - b. This summer we commissioned not only 3 teams who expanded the orphanage in Kitale, Kenya and a youth team that did mission work in PA, we also commissioned Taylor Frank to mission work in Israel/Palestine.
 - i. As you know Israel/Palestine continues to be a volatile region.
 - ii. Taylor and his family carefully considered the risk.
 - iii. They felt that the ministry he was doing and his location in Palestine were both important and safe enough that he should be able to go.
 1. I give them a ton of credit for jumping in with both feet with their eyes wide open to go, do mission, and make disciples of all nations, just as Jesus told us to do in Matthew 28.
 - a. Taylor took a risk.
 - c. I used to love taking risks!
 - i. Before I had kids, I would jet anywhere, anytime.
 - ii. I loved to rock climb, scuba, ski with abandon, roller-blade, and travel the world.
 - iii. Then I had kids – and my parent-protection-gene kicked in.
 1. Can't I wrap these guys in bubble wrap until they grow up?
 - iv. Although I still worry Rachel and Wes, I don't want to put too much fear in my children or in the children of God around me.
 - d. I come by this prudence honestly.
 - i. My father is a risk management consultant and many of our

conversations while driving places or eating together centered around how to make decisions involving risk.

- e. This parable Jesus tells about the wealthy man who entrusts his property to three servants can be seen as a Harvard Business School case in risk management.

- i. Two servants are given 5 and 2 talents respectively and they manage to double their money in the ‘long time’ the master is gone.

- 2. Jesus told this story in the middle of his own personal high-risk venture.¹

- a. It was during the last few days of his life.

- i. Perhaps you have noticed that some bibles put the words of Jesus in red letters.

- 1. When Jesus is speaking, the typeface is red.

- 2. You can even find electronic versions of so-called red-letter gospels.

- ii. Matthew structures his story of the life of Jesus around the five times those red letters appear and Jesus is teaching.

- 1. Scholars call those sections the five major discourses of Jesus.

- 2. Today’s gospel is from this fifth and final teaching section.

- 3. The first teaching section is the Sermon on the Mount found in chapters 5-7 and includes the Beatitudes and the Lord’s Prayer.

- 4. The second teaching section is Jesus commissioning the 12 disciples and instructing them on being missionaries in chapter 10.

- 5. The third teaching section is Jesus’ teaching in parables in chapter 13 and the fourth section is Jesus’ ‘how-to-be-an-effective-church-leader-seminar’ in Chapter 18.

- 6. The main theme of this fifth section of teaching is the final judgment and the ultimate victory of God at the end of time.²

- b. Just before Jesus taught his fourth section, he made the risky decision to leave the safety of rural Galilee and go to Jerusalem, the capital city, where the religious authorities would regard him as a threat to the status quo, and to their own power and prerogatives.

¹ David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors. *Feasting on the Word: Year A Volume 4*. WJK Press, 2011, p. 308.

² Thomas G. Long. *Matthew*. Westminster Bible Companion, 1997, p. 265.

- i. The Romans would most assuredly regard him as a disturber of the peace.
- c. While in Jerusalem, Jesus is preparing his disciples, the crowds, and us to make good decisions even in the face of risk.
 - i. He knows his time on the cross is coming and he wants us to be prepared.
- d. Today's parable is about a wealthy man who goes away on a long journey.
 - i. Before he departs, he distributes his talents to three slaves.
 - ii. It is a great deal of money.
 - 1. A talent is worth fifteen years' worth of a daily laborer's wage.
 - a. In modern terms, if you consider the average annual wage of an American worker to be \$44,888.16 then 15 years at that wage would equal \$673,322.³
 - iii. The first slave takes the money to the market, to a wealth management firm, and invests in high-risk ventures.
 - 1. His five talents (or five times \$675,000 equaling \$3,375,000) are doubled yielding \$6,750,000.
 - a. Warren Buffett would have been impressed.
 - iv. The second slave does the same thing and puts the money to work at high risk.
 - 1. Both do very well.
 - 2. When their master returns, he is very pleased.
 - a. Well done, he says.
 - b. Then he promises that they will receive more responsibility in the future.
 - v. The third slave takes a very different approach with his money, his one talent.
 - 1. This third slave digs a hole in the ground and puts all the money in the hole for safe-keeping.
 - 2. In a time of stock-market decline, this man looks very wise.
 - 3. This is not a bad man.
 - 4. This is a prudent, careful, cautious investor.
 - 5. He is not about to take chances with the money.
 - 6. It is all there, every penny of it, when his master returns.

³ <http://www.ssa.gov/oact/cola/AWI.html> accessed 11/13/14
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7. He is proud of himself
8. Here it is. All of it, safe and sound.
9. For his efforts he is treated as harshly as anyone in the whole Bible.
 - a. His master calls him a ‘wicked and lazy slave’, takes his one talent from him, and has him thrown into the outer darkness.
- e. 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.
 - i. Jesus did not tell it that way, but I cannot help but think that the master would not have been harsh toward them, and might even have applauded their efforts.
 - ii. The point here is not really about doubling your money or accumulating wealth.
 1. The point is about living
 - a. It is about investing.
 - i. It is about taking risks.
 - ii. It is about Jesus himself and what he has done and what is about to happen to him.
 1. Mostly it is about what he hopes and expects of his disciples and us after he is gone.
 2. It is about being a follower of Jesus and what it means to be faithful to him.
- f. The greatest risk of all, it turns out, is not to risk anything, not to care deeply and profoundly enough to give your heart away and in the process risk everything.
 - i. As Alfred Lord Tennyson says, ‘tis better to have loved and lost, then never to have loved at all.’
 - ii. The greatest risk of all is to play it safe, to live cautiously and prudently.
 - iii. We bury too much goodness, time, love, treasure, and talent in the ground.
 1. Why?
 - a. Perhaps some of us feel our talent is truly too small to make a difference.
 - b. Or we may feel resentment or jealousy about another’s wealth.
 - c. In this parable, it is fear and distrust that paralyzes the

third slave.

- i. His view of the master who has generously and freely entrusted him with fifteen years worth of an average laborer's wages keeps him constricted and overly cautious, not willing to take any risk whatsoever.
 1. He projects onto the gracious master his own fears and preconceptions.
2. Perhaps you remember our preaching last year about the ancient church's seven deadly sins.
 - a. One of those sins was sloth.
 - i. 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.
3. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that the sin of respectable people is running from responsibility.
 - a. Bonhoeffer, who was a pacifist, took his own responsibility so seriously he joined the Resistance and helped plan an assassination attempt on Hitler's life.
 - i. His sense of responsibility cost him his life.
4. How important is this personally, in terms of how we live our lives?
 - a. Jesus' warning is that the outcome of playing it safe – not caring, not loving passionately, not investing yourself, not risking anything – is something akin to death, like being banished to the outer darkness.
5. Now for most of us, religion, our personal faith, has not seemed like a high-risk venture.
 - a. In fact, it has seemed to be something like the opposite.
 - b. Faith has seemed to be a personal comfort zone.
 - c. Faith, any of us think, is about personal security, here - and in the hereafter.
 - d. 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.
 - e. Faith, we think, because that is what we have been

taught, is getting our personal theology right and then living a good life by avoiding bad things.

- f. Religion, we think, is a pretty timid, non-risky venture.
- g. 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.
- h. To be his man or woman, Jesus says, is not so much believing ideas about him as it is following him.
- i. It is to experience renewed responsibility of the use and investment of these precious lives of ours.
- j. It is to be bold and brave, to reach high and care deeply.

3. I am a fan of Aaron Sorkin's *The West Wing*.

- a. If you ever watched this drama that ran between 1999 and 2006, you know that the show follows President Jeb Bartlett and his staffers as they face daily decisions and dramatic dilemmas.
 - i. In one episode, President Bartlett is reminiscing about one of his first significant interactions with Mrs. Landingham, the person who eventually moves with him throughout his professional career from his being a university president, to being the Governor of New Hampshire, and eventually becoming President of the United States.
 - ii. Jeb Bartlett grew up in a privileged position and attended a tony prep school where his father was the headmaster.
 - iii. In a flashback at the prep school, Mrs. Landingham and Jeb are talking about pay inequality between the male and female teachers.
 - iv. She says to Jeb,
 - 1. Look at you. You are a boy king.
 - 2. You're a foot smarter than the smartest kid in the class.
 - 3. You're blessed with inspiration.
 - 4. You must know this by now.
 - 5. You must have sensed it.
 - 6. Look, if you think we're wrong ... if you think Mr. Hopkins should honestly get paid more than Mrs. Chadwick, then I respect that.
 - 7. But if you think we're right and you won't speak up because you can't be bothered, then God, Jed, I don't even want to know you.
 - v. Jesus wants to know us.

1. And Jesus wants us to know how much he loves us.
 - a. So much so that he gave us the example of his all-in self-giving.
 - b. His actions and his teachings show and teach us, go, and do likewise.
 - c. His parable of the talents is not so much about the money.
 - i. It is the invitation to the adventure of faith: the high-risk venture of being a disciple of Jesus Christ.
4. Modern wisdom would have us mitigate this high-risk venture.
 - a. Check out any bookstore or MBA program for the plethora of decision-making models.
 - i. We can make a list of pros and cons.
 - ii. We can gather more and more data.
 1. Then watch out for analysis paralysis!
 - iii. We can track our decisions and seek to improve our successful outcomes.
 - iv. We can make certain we always consult a devil's advocate.
 - v. We can avoid blinders that insider-trading or decision making might engender.
 - b. The best-selling decision-making book of all times is the Bible.
 - i. Biblical wisdom (remember the acronym – Bible is basic instructions before leaving earth) gives us grade-A decision-making tools.
 - ii. In Galatians 5, Paul encourages us to live by the Spirit and when we make decisions guided by God we show forth the fruits of the spirit: peace, joy, love, patience, goodness, kindness, gentleness, humility and self-control.
 - iii. What decisions have you made yielding these fruits?
 1. Perhaps you have coached little league or volunteered at the Ronald McDonald House or sponsored a JASY camper or bought a door for the Kitale orphanage or baked cookies for memorial receptions or trained as a Stephen Minister showing Christ-like care to others, or knit precious hats for newborns in the NICU, or taught LOGOS or Sunday School, or fixed a meal for our RAIHN families, or any one of a thousand great give-of-your-precious-talent opportunities.

2. You and I know how good those things have felt.
 - a. They were not always easy to do, but the satisfaction was more than worth it.
 - b. Paul writes the Thessalonians and us encouraging us to keep on keeping on with these risky ventures of our selves.
 - c. And keep encouraging one another to take these risks.
 - d. The ice-bucket challenge is a lot easier when there's somebody holding a dry towel and a warm blanket after the fact.
5. What about Taylor Frank's decision to go to Israel last summer?
 - a. Was it a high-risk venture?
 - i. You bet.
 - ii. Taylor had to be all in to raise enough money to get himself there and to give up any income he could have made during his absence from the States.
 - iii. Did it pay off?
 1. Oh yeah.
 2. Lives were changed...including Taylor's.
 3. May we be bold enough to go and do likewise.