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## The Risk of Faith

(Matthew 25:13-28 NRSV) "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour. 14 "For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; 15 to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. 16 The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. 17 In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. 18 But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. 19 After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. 20 Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.' 21 His 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.' 22 And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.' 23 His 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.' 24 Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; 25 so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' 26 But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? 27 Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. 28 So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents.'"

I want you to do something. I want you to try very, very hard to imagine yourself hearing this story that Jesus told as if you were hearing it for the first time. Don't think of it as "a parable," don't think of it as being "scripture" which you know is *supposed* to be deep and meaningful and "holy." Imagine, if you will, that you are hearing it simply as a story being told by a good storyteller and which you only know is supposed to have some sort of point to it. Imagine how this story, heard as if for the first time, makes you feel and try to imagine what it causes to go through your mind. Can you do that?

Now, this also means that if you are hearing it as if for the first time that, as with any story of this sort, your mind is going to imagine yourself as if you were one or the

other of the characters in this story. And when we're able to do this, I'm going to suggest that there may well be one overwhelming feeling that is provoked in us and that is: **anxiety. Anxiousness. Worry. Fear.**

Why? Well, the master is leaving! He's leaving! Can't you just imagine the rumors and the worry that flew around the place, that got talked about on the parking lot, that burned up the phone lines and the email and the Facebook postings?

- *"The master's leaving; I wonder if he's coming back?"*
- *"What are we going to do?"*
- *"I wonder what will change while he's gone?"*
- *"What should we do while he's gone?"*
- *"Is he going to leave us clear instructions?"*
- *"Is this some sort of trick?!?"*
- *"What if there's an emergency?"*
- *"How does he really want us to treat his stuff while he's away?"*
- *"Who's going to be in charge?"*
- *"It isn't very clear how we're supposed to behave while he's gone."*
- *"He wants us to do **what** with his money?!?"*
- *"He didn't leave us any instructions at all!"*

Don't you use feel your blood pressure rising as you experience the anxiety that these servants must have been feeling? They wanted to do right by the master, but he indeed left them with little by way of instruction. The story simply says that he gave three of them some money and then he went away. And now in their trembling hands they hold a huge portion of his assets and they just aren't sure what to do. So before we jump to the end of the story we need to first feel the almost palpable anxiety these servants must have had when facing a future where suddenly decisions are in their hands about what will happen and the way isn't at all clear.

And what do they do and what does the master do when he returns? Well, the three servants take three very different approaches to these assets that they have been handed. The first and second went out and invested his that they had been entrusted with. No doubt they too were nervous and anxious, but they chose, nonetheless, to put those assets to work. But the third servant – amidst that anxiety about what he should do and how long the master would be gone and the lack of clarity about the future – buried his share of the assets in the ground. He didn't lose anything but he didn't gain anything either. He attempted, in a way, to stop time and to stop change and to stop the anxiety of the future by simply trying to ignore these things and hoping that that would be enough to get by. But it wasn't. It wasn't just the money he buried in the sand; he buried his head along with it and hoped that when he emerged all would be okay. This third servant reminds me of the man I once saw in Las Vegas who played roulette for hours and hours, and each time he put four chips on red and four chips on black. He claimed that that way he could have fun and not lose any money. But, of course, if you know how roulette works you know that every so often the zero or double-zero hits and our timid bettor would in fact lose no matter what. And so slowly but surely his strategy of apparently not risking anything actually made things worse for him; rather than being safe and prudent, it just prolonged his losses

But let's skip to the end of the story. The master indeed returns and the story says that he is very happy with the first two servants. He is pleased with what they each have done and give them more responsibility, even more assets of his to now be responsible for. But that third one, that one who wanted to play it safe, that one who put it all in a hole, that one who bet on both red and black mistakenly thinking that while he wouldn't win anything he wouldn't lose either – uh-oh! The master is angry, telling him that he didn't even go put it in the local bank where it at least would have made a percent or two of interest. He is angry that when he gave over the ability to influence

the future to this servant, the servant basically squandered it, refused to try and make the future better than the past, tried to make time, as it were, stand still.

So, having tried to hear this story with fresh ears, now let us ask what it might be trying to tell us about our faith, what Jesus might be using it for to try to tell us something about how to live and think, what kind of attitudes we should have as ones who would follow Him faithfully. And what we hear in the story is indeed this: Jesus lauds and praises the first two servants and is angry with the third servant. But why? What do we make of that? Well, just this, I think: Jesus is saying to those servants and to us that to live well is indeed to risk, to live well is often to risk a great deal, to be faithful to the past means taking risks – important risks, real risks – for the future. And, let's be honest: while our reaction upon hearing this story is probably to say “*Yay master, you go! Sic that silly servant!*” I would ask each of us, isn't there something in **us** that would have been tempted, **IS** tempted, to do exactly what that third servant did? To find ourselves in the midst of anxiety feeling sometimes as if the best that we are able to do is to try not to lose what has been, rather than to focus on what we could do, what we could gain. Yet what this parable is pointing out, pulling no punches about it, is that to live – *to live even on one single day* – is to be put into the position of being called on to risk and to realize that the possibility of standing still isn't really a possibility at all. There are days that I don't like that, I don't like it at all! But Jesus just isn't much concerned, is He, with what I like? He is much much more concerned with *acting in a way that blesses the future*.

I want to say just a little more about this risk business. The first is this: Risk is not risk unless it's real. It may be fun to play poker with matchsticks as the stake, but the fun fades quickly because the risk isn't real. The second thing to say is this: Risk is not recklessness. To be reckless is to commit yourselves to things that you know have

ZERO chance of happening. To be reckless is to deliberately decide to ignore the opportunities that God has placed in front of you, the talents that God has given you. So, looked at that way, in your own life or in the life of the church, the most reckless thing you can ever do in virtually any situation is to decide to not do anything. *It was not the two- or five-talent servants in the parable who were reckless, it was the one-talent servant who buried his talent in the dirt!* **That** is true recklessness in the face of God's grace – to refuse to take God up on the opportunity to risk that God has placed before you for the sake of blessing the future.

There is, in fact, a sense in which God asks **us** to do exactly what **God** has done! For, you see, God took a tremendous risk in creating this world. God took a huge risk in creating a world where *all* its inhabitants have power and where sometimes that power is used for destructive things. It would have been easier for God to create a world where everything was determined and controlled and pre-ordained. But that would have offered less beauty, less possibility for truly wonderful acts of caring, truly sacrificial actions that created good beyond imagining. Now, I can imagine that there are days when God looks at some of the things that go on in this world and God might well wonder if the risk was too great. And yet God keeps on risking, God keeps on offering to the creatures He has made the opportunity to do great and wondrous good things; God keeps placing talents in your hands and my hands and saying *"Please don't be reckless with these – please don't bury them in the dirt, but use them, risk them, to do wonderful things in My sight."*<sup>1</sup>

Let me leave us with this thought: Some of you may wonder how we decide what to risk? I think the standard is actually very simple: Jesus gave it to us; the church has come to call it the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. The Great

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<sup>1</sup>This paragraph is very indebted to conversation with the Rev. Barbara Blaisdell.

Commandment is to “love one another” – which is to say to love those in this church community AND those who don’t yet know the wonderful grace and care we have here. The Great Commission is to go into all world, making disciples and teaching people the opportunities for abundant life, the opportunities for real hope, real peace when they know the God that we know. Everything we do, all the risks we take, all the talents we put at God’s service are to be motivated by that Great Commandment and that Great Commission.<sup>2</sup> And when we do that, when we choose to continue to risk in that cause, when we choose not to be reckless by deciding to stand still, then I truly believe that God will come to us and say, as did that master to those risk-taking servants, “*Well-done, well-done!*”

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<sup>2</sup>This sermon is also indebted to some of the ideas from an article by Dan Hotchkiss entitled “The Stewardship of Risk” that was originally published online at the Alban Institute’s website but which seems to be no longer available.