

“Risk management”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Luke 19:28-40 and Matthew 25:14-30

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Some time ago, Jenna and I were talking with a doctor. He says to us, “What you need to consider is this: are you the kind of people who ride a motorcycle without a helmet, knowing that 99 out of the 100 times, you’ll be just fine?” We looked at each other and then at the doctor, and said, “Um, we’re not the kind of people who ride a motorcycle *with* a helmet.”

I’m so cautious that I just spent days agonizing over what paint color we should risk for our house. Should we do that blue, or that slightly lighter blue?

I’m so cautious that I went to the number one party school in the nation, and I spent most nights in the library.

I’m so cautious that, when Emerson was a newborn, I would sometimes stand over him for hours, staring at him like a psycho, just to make sure he was still breathing.

So you’ll know I’m being honest when I say this parable troubles me. How is the last guy who cautiously protects his master’s money not the hero of this story?

In Jesus’ parable, a man entrusts his money to three people. One talent was worth about 15 years’ wages for a working person, so this was a lot of money. The first two invest the man’s money and grow it; they are rewarded. The last buries his money to keep it safe; he is punished. Why would the master praise the two who risked his money (sure, they grew it, but they just as easily could have lost it), and condemn the one who protected his money?

According to rabbinic law at the time, the best way to protect money from being stolen was to bury it; that same law stated that if you bury money someone else has entrusted to you, you are freed from all liability for it. It is no longer your responsibility.

Sounds pretty good. Know the money’s safe, and you’re off the hook. Sounds prudent to me. All of which makes the rapid and violent response of the master all the more shocking.

We are left with only one conclusion: the master’s goal was never for these men to protect the entrusted treasure. That’s not why he gave them the talents; he had something else in mind. The first two must have picked up on that. But the last man didn’t. He became obsessed with protecting the money. Why? He says, “I was afraid.”

O how many times has that voice murmured in the beating of our hearts? Better to hide, better to stay the same, better not to venture much, lest we lose.

It was fear that drove him to bury his treasure and protect it at all costs. Just as it is fear that often limits our speech, our parenting, our faith. Fear that builds a wall on our southern border. Fear that stifles the moral courage of our leaders. Fear that stops us from helping the stranger. Fear that keeps churches from risking new ministries. Fear that tames our theology. Fear that silences our evangelism. Fear that clogs our ears to new meanings of Scripture and grips antiquated ideas about gender, sexuality, and science.

All because we think we have something to protect.

It is this fear-induced passivity, this guarded stagnancy, this frightened fundamentalism, which troubled Jesus. It kept cropping up in his ministry: religious leaders who wanted to know why he was challenging the status quo, why he was questioning the traditional interpretations of Scripture, why he dared claim that a new thing was happening. We heard it happen today in the Gospel of Luke. Some of the Pharisees hear the disciples praising God with a loud voice and proclaiming Christ's deeds of power, and they order them to be silent. Why? Because they were scared.

Like the one-talent man, they thought it was their job to protect their treasure—to protect the law, to protect God. So they buried God in the past. They sought, using their own language, “to build a fence around the law,” so that no change, no new thought, could threaten it.

This paralysis left no room for the revelation of Jesus Christ, for the mission of Paul to the Gentiles, for the expansion of God's love to include the outsider.

Jesus tells this story because he needed his disciples—needed us—to understand that it's not our job to protect God, or Scripture, or the life entrusted to us. It's not our job to protect the church. Do we really think All Mighty God needs our protection? Our job is to risk our treasure on the chance that it might grow.

That's what it means to follow Christ, who instead of protecting his life, gave it up so that the love of God might grow in us. It's why he showed his wounds, rather than hiding them. It's why he washed feet, and kissed lepers, and stood with prostitutes. Because to walk in the way of the cross is to vulnerably open oneself to truths yet unrealized, to love and grace yet unshared.

Even if the man had adventured with the one talent and lost it, it would have been better than doing nothing at all. The kingdom of God wants no “reasonable” life from us. We are to take what ability and power, what talents, we have been given and use them to grow love, to awaken people to the mystery of God, to increase the influence of the gospel.

We should claw at the earth to unbury this God. This God who will—and this is the Easter proclamation that is so close to us today—who will rise up.

This is not risk for risk's sake. Taken out of context, this parable could appear to justify greed and exclusion, the kind of risk that hurts others.

But parables cannot be read without context. Right after this parable comes the parable we've been studying in our Lenten soup and study, the parable that identifies Christ not with the powerful but with the "least of these," with the hungry, and the sick, and the stranger.

This parable that we've just read is intended to teach us one thing: that we must be bold and generous. We are not meant to be stagnant. We are supposed to take risks, be open, and try. But we have to wait until the next parable when we are told *what* we are supposed to try: ministries of compassion and justice.

To risk is to love your enemy. To risk is to give more—more time, more compassion, more money—than you think you can afford. To risk is to speak up on behalf of the gospel even when you don't have the words, even when others might try to silence you. To risk is to be open to ever reforming work of the Spirit, to the ambiguity and mystery of God.

To risk is to wave your palms, shout your praise, and meet anew the God who who spoke over the deep, moved in the wind, loved on the cross, turned over tables, and danced with the devil till he was no more.

Annie Dillard writes, "Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us to where we can never return."

Today, this waking God rides into Jerusalem, as the city erupts in praise. Some of the Pharisees try to quiet this waking God, to keep him safe and buried, but Jesus answers, "I tell you, if these [people] were silent, the stones would shout out."

Our God refuses to be buried, to be silent and play it safe. Our God is on the move. Will you follow? **Amen.**