

“Risk and Reality”

A sermon by the Rev. Brian D. Ellison

East Liberty Presbyterian Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

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Text: Matthew 25:14-30

It was three or four years after he had started there as their pastor.

He was a good pastor. They were a good church. They were doing good things together. The church had called him right out of seminary—a middle-of-the-road seminary. They were a middle-of-the-road church. He’d come from a pretty conservative church, lived a pretty sheltered life. He’d expanded his thinking in seminary, though mostly his thinking about God and about the Bible, not so much his thinking about himself.

So it was three or four years in, when the church was working up its long-range plan, while they were expanding their community outreach, and building on an addition, and hiring an associate pastor and a youth director. They were so busy being the church that no one really asked whether their single young pastor was gay. In fact, he’d only recently admitted it to himself.

Many wouldn’t have cared of course. But some would have. And this was well back in the days before the Presbyterian Church would permit it—that was still a long way off. And so a year or two later, when he met someone, and they started dating and fell in love, and it became clear this was going to last, he realized he had some decisions to make.

Should he take a risk and come out and tell the congregation about his relationship? It would be devastating news for some; it would feel like betrayal to others. There would be disagreement and division. Much of the work they were doing together would come to a screeching halt—maybe also the job itself.

Or should he take a different risk and end the relationship, obeying the Book of Order but denying the love he and his partner shared, denying the truth about himself? It could be done, but what damage inside and out would follow in its wake?

Or should he take a still different risk and continue serving, but quietly, never acknowledging a major part of his life? The ministry would continue and so would the relationship, but at what cost to his integrity, and eventually also his ministry. There would be some nagging fear of discovery. And people sharing their lives with him would not know the fullness of who he was.

As Christians we are often forced to confront reality. And the reality of obedience to Jesus Christ, the reality of answering God’s call, is that it is impossible to live without risk—risk if you do, and risk if you don’t. There is the risk we see and know about, the kinds of risks we generally try to avoid. But there is always another risk—the risk of avoidance, the risk of complacency, the risk of safety.

And sometimes that risk is the even greater one.

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A talent is a lot of money. An extraordinarily large amount of money. It's thought to have been about fifteen or twenty years of wages for a day laborer. Perhaps think of it as half a million dollars or so, maybe more. Which means this man, the master, is extraordinarily rich. These servants, extraordinarily trusted.

There are a lot of problems when we hear a story like this – it has slaves, and we're certainly not comfortable with such a casual mention of that. It occupies a different world with some variables we don't understand. There's the whole casting into the outer darkness bit. But let's just let it be what it is for today, a story that Jesus tells—probably makes up on the spot—to make a point. That's what the parables were, stories with a point—not necessarily a point everyone understood, but a point.

And the purpose of the story like many others in Matthew, was to tell the listeners something about, well ... “it.” “It is as if...” this story starts. To learn what “it” is—what this story is an illustration of—we actually have to go back to the prior story, Jesus tells that story and this one together, and the subject, at least as he introduces them, is the same. “The kingdom of heaven will be like this...” is he starts that last story. The purpose is to tell us about *heaven*: What it's like when everything's firing on all God's cylinders. When things are as they should be.

Which doesn't really help us figure out the point. *Heaven is like a place where a rich man gives one servant five enormous bags of money, one two, and the other one. Two of them invest and do well, which is good; the third one means well burying the money but it was very bad. The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.*

Is the point to teach us to invest wisely what we've been given? Seems like a good message for us, and nice of Jesus to preach it around stewardship pledge time. But I have to say, it sure would have been helpful if he had told us *how* the five-talent servant doubled his money, or *how* the two-talent servant did it. Alas, it doesn't tell us how they invested so wisely, actually it doesn't say they invested *wisely* at all. They might have gotten lucky.

Is the point to teach us to be obedient? If so, it seems strange that all we hear about that last servant—the one cast into the outer darkness with the weeping and teeth-gnashing and all that—is that he meant well. Not actually given any specific instructions, he actually thought he was doing an okay thing. Seems strange for good intentions, even with flawed execution, to be judged so harshly.

No, I don't think these work as the point Jesus was trying to make. I don't think they make sense. But clearly Jesus must have a point. Clearly there was something qualitatively different about what the first two servants did and what the third one did. Something different about their actions, about their words, about their heart. But it doesn't seem to me the main difference was the return they got on their investment. It seems to me the difference was their attitude toward risk.

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These are interesting days in the life of the church. I mean the whole Church of Jesus Christ. I mean especially the church in America and most especially the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Our journey toward the full inclusion you celebrate in your worship today has been a rough journey at times, and it isn't over.

Beginning in 1997, the organization I now lead and that you have long supported—the Covenant Network of Presbyterians—worked to eliminate from the church Constitution the language the kept Lesbian, gay, bisexual people from being ordained as ministers (or elders or deacons) in the church. It was an exhausting conversation, and not always pretty. The Covenant Network started as a bunch of pastors and church leaders trying to get the church to be more welcoming but also trying to hold the church together in the meantime. Trying to have the conversation but not a fight. Trying to change things but to leave us stronger and not torn apart afterward. Churches like yours led the way, including your pastor, Randy Bush, who is co-moderator of our board of directors. People across America took stands, spoke prophetically, held feet to the fire, stayed in relationship.

Sometimes we took steps in the right direction; other times, not so much. And in the meantime, some churches ignored the policy and did what they thought was right anyway. Others left the denomination because they got tired of talking. Many, many LGBT people, and their families and friends who supported them, walked away with deep wounds.

I'll fast-forward to the end, in 2011, fourteen years later, the policy was undone. Today, LGBT people can be ordained and are being ordained in some places—although much less in others, where there are still people deeply troubled by the prospect of people like me preaching and teaching in churches, or praying at gravesides, or serving you bread and wine. There's more work to do for organizations like ours, still teaching, still persuading, still supporting those who are being kept out.

But by and large, we've seen incredible progress—maybe you heard, this summer the General Assembly of the church even made it possible for ministers to officiate at same-sex marriages in states where that's legal (states like Pennsylvania!) with a vote now underway across the country to make that our permanent policy, updating the language in our constitution to reflect that marriage is between two people, not only between a man and a woman. We are thrilled not to be looking back from our new reality.

But there is a problem with reality. See, reality only tells us where we have been before, where we've gone so far. Reality doesn't tell us where God would have us go next.

Because there is another reality: That we have been entrusted with much. In many churches, maybe even this one, we might now take for granted that people who want to can serve openly. That LGBT people will have an authentic welcome. And thus it is possible for us not to look down the street at the church with the gay kid who will never have anyone tell him he should go to seminary. Or to never see the church in the next town with the mom who leaves her partner at home and brings her kids Sunday mornings but hasn't asked for them to be baptized for fear of

the reaction when the pastor learns they have two moms. Maybe are thankful, maybe even proud, that we're not a church like that. We've done the right things and now we are on firm moral ground. We are safe.

But as Jesus says in another place, of the one to whom much is given...

Well, it is as if we have been given a talent, and knowing our master as we do, knowing the way the master reaps where he hasn't sown, and harvests where he hasn't scattered, having done so much already, we bury it. We cling to our hard-earned achievements of the past, preserving the wealth of good will and justice abounding around us, ensure a comfortable if not extravagant future.

And who could blame us? Because make no mistake, there is risk.

There is risk in re-entering the arena to engage with people who still disagree with us.

There is risk of stirring up trouble by trying to do more, to get involved in care and advocacy of those who have been wounded, when there is so much easier, less controversial, mission work to do.

There is risk in taking votes. In staging debates. Of losing friends, or just losing. And there is risk in sitting down for coffee with someone who has wounded us with words before.

Frankly, the risk is very high.

In fact, this doesn't just apply to us as a church in how we respond to the call to be welcoming of all God's children. It applies to all of us in our lives, in all the places we have received blessing, sometimes even abundance. Health or family or faith or joy or wealth or opportunity.

When the healthy travel to do mission in west Africa, they risk becoming sick themselves.

When we give to a person in need, we risk throwing our money away on someone who might squander or mishandle it.

When we share our deepest feelings with someone we trust, they might just betray us.

There is always risk.

But there may be much greater risk in burying the talent that has been entrusted to us in the ground. When fear –and that is after what the third servant identifies as his reasoning, “I was afraid” – causes us to pull back and hunker down, well then we may be doing the most risky thing of all. The much-too-risky thing.

Of the one to whom much has been given, much is expected.

The status quo isn't what we are investing for. The present isn't profit.

The life we know now, the reality, is not heaven. It is not the world God envisions for us.

Faith demands that reality requires risk—that risk must sometimes become our new reality.

Risking our reputations for cause of Christ, of justice, of inclusion of all people.
Risking our comfort for the hard work required to engage minds and hearts.
Risking our money for the sake of projects that will reach people with good news.
Risking the lives we now know, for a life that we can only imagine for ourselves and for the world.

And when rather than waiting, we act... When rather than leaving the field, we keep playing...
When rather than celebrating, we engage...
When rather than saving, we invest...

Then the payoff for that risk might just become a *new* reality. The master rewards the servants who took risks, and there is nothing in this story to suggest he would have rewarded them any less if they had come back and said markets our down and we lost your money but we tried. The sin was in failing to put it all out there for the sake of the one to whom all the talents belonged.

You see, it isn't so much that our master reaps where he didn't sow, or harvests where he didn't scatter. It's that the master was out there sowing and scattering long, long before we started paying attention.

So let us take the risk, trusting that God will make a new way, do a new thing, refill our coffers with grace and love beyond our imagining.

So may we live into a new reality. Amen.