

Pentecost 22

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As I drove by a church doing some renovation work on the building I noticed a sign at the end of the driveway – “Danger, enter at your own risk.” Most of us if asked understand faith to be a pretty low risk, lame venture compared to other areas of our lives. Faith many of us think is about personal security in the here and now, as well as in the hereafter. Faith is believing whatever ideas we have in our heads about God and what it means in today’s world to be a follower of Jesus. Faith we are taught is getting our own personal theology right so we can live a good life avoiding bad things.

In the parable we just heard read, Jesus implies just the opposite. To live a life of faith is to take a risk, to be bold for the sake of the gospel, to expand our horizons and responsibilities. This parable is an invitation to the adventure of faith.

Jesus told this story in the midst of his own high risk venture. It is told during the last days of his life. He has chosen to leave the safety of Galilee and go to Jerusalem where the civil and religious authorities see him as a threat to their own power and prestige.

Jesus tells the story of a wealthy man who goes on a long journey. Before he departs he decides to divide his wealth among three of his most trusted servants. The first servant takes the money to a risk management firm. He asked the manager what he must do to double the money. I am told by someone who had a job in the investment business that the manager would most likely tell him about Rule 72. I had never heard of Rule 72. This is what I learned. If your investment has a guaranteed interest rate of say five percent you divide the interest rate into 72 and that will tell you the number of years it will take you to double your money. If you ask about risk, you will be told you can quickly double your money but it is high risk, you may also lose all of your investment.

The first servant decides to take the risk. He invests all the money entrusted to his care in a high risk fund. The second servant decides to do the same thing. As it turns out, they both do well. When the master returns he is very pleased, “Well done good and trustworthy servant...” He promises these servants more responsibility in the future.

The third servant takes a different approach. He is a careful and prudent man.

He takes the money, digs a hole, and buries it in the ground. When the master returns he is able to return every penny that had been entrusted to him. In this time of stock market decline, he would appear to be the wisest of the three servants. Feeling proud of himself, he gives the money back to his master, “Here it is, all that you entrusted to me.” I do not recall anyone in the Bible being treated as harshly as this servant who was banished to outer darkness.

I have to wonder what would have happened if the reverse had been true, but that is not the way Jesus told the story. The point of Jesus’ story is not about money or accumulating wealth. It is about living. It is about taking a risk. It is about being a follower of Jesus and what it means to be faithful.

As Jesus tells the story, the greatest risk is not taking a risk at all. It is not caring enough to give your all, to risk your heart and in the process risk everything. It is running from responsibility by playing it safe and thus not living into our potential as human beings.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a well-known theologian, was a pacifist in Germany during World War II. He took his faith seriously and his responsibility as a follower of Jesus seriously enough to take a risk. Bonhoeffer joined the Resistance movement that plotted to assassinate Adolf Hitler. His sense of risk for the sake of responsibility cost him his life. Bonhoeffer said, “The sin of respectable people is running from responsibility.”

Jesus warning is that the outcome of playing it safe, of not caring enough to take a risk, of not loving passionately, is the same as being banished into outer darkness. Acting this way as a follower of his is akin to death.

So, as I read this parable, it is an invitation from Jesus to engage our faith fully, to take a risk for the sake of the gospel. In the closing words of Matthew’s Gospel the resurrected Jesus says to his followers, “Do not sit idly by but go make disciples of all nations...teaching them all I have taught you. “ What an exciting privilege you and I share as we live into this invitation to go into the world to share God’s love and grace with all whom we meet. Being good stewards calls us to take a risk for Jesus to offer ourselves and our community in a high risk venture. How about it? Are you ready to join the saints who have gone before us and take the risk for the sake of the Gospel?

Amen