

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost  
November 15, 2020  
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*Matthew 25: 14-30*

## **Taking a Risk**

You know, this year—2020—has made us aware of things that we haven't considered much in the past.

I don't know about you, but I'm certainly more aware of my own health.

I feel less confident about the future than I did a year ago, both for myself and for our nation.

And I reflect on how so many are experiencing profound insecurity and uncertainty.

Which is to say, I think 2020 has probably made all of us much more conscious of how we experience risk.

And when I speak of risk, I am not thinking of physical danger. Covid-19 is certainly urgently dangerous. Life in general can be dangerous. Seventy million people in the United States required medical attention for accidents in 2016.<sup>1</sup>

No, the risk I am thinking of is the fear of getting the future wrong. Of making the wrong choices. Of being criticized for bad judgment.

And the concern is that fear about this kind of risk can cause us to miss important opportunities and can paralyze us into inaction.

It sounds easy to talk about this in the abstract, but it is hard — at least it's hard for me — to admit how difficult it actually is to deal with risk and uncertainty and make the right choice.

A small example for me personally is the story of how I came to be here worshiping with you today. Those of you familiar with the story of my faith journey know that for the first half of my adult life I was a committed atheist.

And then I found faith, and that presented a scary choice. What to do about it? Should I explore how to join and be active in a community of faith? Was that the right choice? And if it was, where, exactly, was the right place within the community of faith? I was afraid of being criticized by my atheist friends and rejected by the community I was trying to join.

The safe choice would have been no choice. Live with my new faith by myself. Instead, finally, I called a dear friend who was a member of Christ Church Episcopal in Alexandria and asked, "Will you take me to church with you?"

Probably everyone here today can tell similar stories themselves. One contemporary common example is the opportunity to do something about racism in our community and our nation.

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<sup>1</sup> 39.5 million physician office visits for unintentional injuries and 29.4 million emergency department visits for same. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, *National Ambulatory Medical Care Survey, 2016*, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/accidental-injury.htm> (accessed November 11, 2020).

People of color risk pain and rejection by articulating their reality. Whites are deeply uneasy about being judged for denying or being dismissive of that reality. For all sides, there is risk, and for many whites, at least, the status quo may seem a safer choice. But that risk is set against the possibility of healing and progress.

Understanding this aspect of risk, the fear of making bad life choices, is one of the points of today's Gospel reading from Matthew. If you read the passage in Matthew together with the Old Testament reading from Zephaniah,<sup>2</sup> Psalm 90,<sup>3</sup> and the first letter to the Thessalonians,<sup>4</sup> another potential theme is that the time available to each of us to answer God's call can be unexpectedly short, so live life accordingly. As the Epistle says, "[T]he day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night."<sup>5</sup>

Yet another possibility is that Matthew Chapter 5 is some weird pean to the profit motive and Biblical foreshadowing of the idea that you can judge the state of the nation by looking at the Dow Jones Industrial index. That, of course, is not the intent of the passage. The entirety of Scripture makes clear that, quoting from Paul in 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy, "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith."<sup>6</sup>

To me, in the context of what we are thinking about today, it seems clear that the money mentioned in the passage in Matthew is simply a metaphor for benefit or gain. Parables were an important literary technique of the time, arising out of the oral storytelling tradition. Metaphors were used to give the audience something they could easily relate to. Like the personal story I used earlier in this sermon.

Under this interpretation, what Jesus is teaching in the parable is that all improvement, all betterment, involves taking a risk. And even more important, God *expects* us to take that risk. Because God has supplied each of us with gifts and the ability to use them to love and serve him.

Talents were a unit of money used in the biblical world. In this case, they are a metaphor for the natural abilities God has given each of us. A good singing voice. Doing math easily. Keen eyesight. A love of art. Don't get confused. The innate abilities I just mentioned are also in English called "talents." But the words are not the same in the Greek in which the New Testament was written.<sup>7</sup> Here we are talking about God's gifts to each of us, not money. Unique

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<sup>2</sup> Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18.

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 90:1-8, (9-11), 12.

<sup>4</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:2.

<sup>6</sup> 1 Timothy 6:10. Also, Luke 18:25 ("For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God"), Matthew 6:19 ("Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven"), and 1 Timothy 6:17 ("As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches"). And in the Old Testament, Proverbs 13:11 ("Wealth gained hastily will dwindle..."), and Proverbs 11:28 ("Whoever trusts in his riches will fall, but the righteous will flourish like a green leaf.") to cite just a few examples.

<sup>7</sup> In Greek the word for the money unit is *talánto* (τάλαντο), written with an *alpha* in the second syllable. The word for natural ability is *talénto* (ταλέντο), written with an *epsilon* in the second syllable, or *idiofyía* (ιδιοφυία), which means really talented.

gifts. We did not all get the same gifts. But we did get the same expectation that we would learn about our gifts and seek to use them as God intended. *Not bury them in a field in fear of making the wrong choice.*

Scripture makes clear that even if we are inspired to take chances, to pursue something new, we will not always succeed. As it is written in Ecclesiastes, “When you dig a well, you may fall in.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, when you think about it, *God* does not always succeed with *us*. We are given free will. As a result, we sometimes fail to accept God’s love so freely given. Heck, I was being too polite. Seldom do we accept God’s gifts.

And yet God never gives up on us.

He continues to take a risk on us.

Theologian Thomas Jay Ord has a lovely phrase for this. He calls it God’s “divine gamble.”<sup>9</sup> A gamble on which He bet His only son.

It can’t be denied that in making choices we may also be giving up things we have now. Things we are comfortable and familiar with.

Like white privilege.

Jesus is honest about this in Luke Chapter 14.<sup>10</sup> There, in the translation of the Bible called *The Message*, Jesus says “Simply put, if you’re not willing to take what is dearest to you, whether plans or people, and kiss it good-bye, you can’t be my disciple.”<sup>11</sup>

No wonder we are sometimes frozen into inaction by the seeming cost of choosing the wrong thing.

By the way, it may also be the case that the stakes being portrayed in today’s Gospel reading were also huge. The Greek manuscript clearly uses the word “talent” to describe the money left with the servants. In most modern Bible translations that is usually assumed to mean “a few valuable coins.”

But in Jesus’ time, a talent was literally 130 pounds of pure silver. Worth about \$50,000 today.<sup>12</sup> Best scholars can figure, back then a talent was the entire annual income of 50 or more average laborers—a whole village.<sup>13</sup> Even if the word “talent” is itself a metaphor, the parable may be

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<sup>8</sup> Ecclesiastes 10:8.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Jay Ord, “Imitate God — Take Risks!”, July 29, 2010, [http://thomasjaylor.com/index.php/blog/archives/imitate\\_god\\_-\\_take\\_risks](http://thomasjaylor.com/index.php/blog/archives/imitate_god_-_take_risks) (accessed November 12, 2020).

<sup>10</sup> Luke 14:25-33.

<sup>11</sup> Luke 14:33, *The Message*.

<sup>12</sup> The heavy common talent, used in New Testament times, was 58.9 kg (129 lb 14 oz). [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talent\\_\(measurement\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talent_(measurement)) (accessed November 10, 2020).

<sup>13</sup> In 1st century CE Israel, 1 talent = 30,000 denarii. Average wage = 1.5 denarii per day. So, 1 talent = the average yearly earnings of 50 workers. Katrina D. Hamel, “Wages, Food Prices, and Shopping for the Family in First-Century Israel,” April 8, 2020 (Accessed at <https://www.katrinahamel.com/post/wages-food-prices-and-shopping-for-the-family-in-first-century-israel> on November 11, 2020).

intended to be an example of choices with enormous downsides, which nevertheless must be faced.

So how do we find the strength, the courage, the conviction to make choices about life? Especially when we suspect God is calling us, but the risks seem so large?

I can share the two answers that have helped me the past six months.

First, ask God for help.

Pray.

I know that seems to be a message we have repeated in sermons throughout this church year. The power of prayer is one of the Year A lectionary themes. Remember Philippians 4: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything *by prayer and supplication* with thanksgiving *let your requests be made known to God.*”<sup>14</sup>

Second, use your support group.

Yes, you have one.

Imagine you are sitting in a pew at Holy Cross before the virus. Look around. Here we are. All of us sitting next to you. *We* are your support group! And *you* are part of ours! We are all facing choices. Many of us face the same choices.

Think about the choices Holy Cross has faced this year.

Could we continue worship and pastoral care in the face of the virus?

Could we keep connected to each other?

Could we search for and call a priest-in-charge?

Could we find a way to continue spiritual formation virtually?

Could we understand the need to address structural racism and commit to change?

I for one am proud that we understood the need to make these choices and made them. True, there are still other choices still before us. Especially in the areas of the budget.

But the point is that here at Holy Cross there is a community of Christians seeking to learn how best to make choices for themselves as well as for our small part of the community of God.

As we head into Advent, the season of preparation, I invite each of us spend a moment this week taking stock of the choices before us individually, as a parish, as a community, and as a nation.

And to ask how can we, the people of Holy Cross, do better in taking a risk for God?

Amen.

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<sup>14</sup> Philippians 4:6. Emphasis added.