

RISK OF BEING NEIGHBOR
Zephaniah 1:7, 12-14; Matthew 22:38-40, 25:14-30

Today we continue the third week of looking at the parables of Jesus, recorded in the Gospel According to Matthew, as they are reflected through the Greatest Commandment given in Matthew 22:38-40:

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul, and all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like unto it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Now lend your ears to the hearing and the understanding of God's Holy Word as it comes to us from Matthew 25:14-30:

Ask any investment banker or manager what you must be willing to do to double your money and he or she will probably tell you about the Rule of 72. If your investment has a bar anted interest rate of 5 percent, you divide the interest rate into 72, and the answer will be the number of years it will take to double your money. Five percent into 72 equals 14-1/2 years. If you ask about how risky this is, you will learn that if you want to double your money quickly, the risk escalates dramatically. In the world of venture capital only one out of 4 or 5 – some say one out of 10 – makes it. The other times you lose – everything.

Jesus told this parable in the midst of his own personal high-risk venture. It was during the last few days of his ministry and life. Earlier he had made the decision to leave the safety of rural Galilee and go to Jerusalem, the capital city, where the religious authorities regarded him as a threat to the status quo and to their own power.

This story is about a wealthy man who goes away on a long trip and entrusts his fortune to the care of three slaves. The first two invest the money and do very well. The third takes a very different approach. He digs a hole and puts his talent in the hole for safe-keeping. He is proud of himself. He is a good and prudent, careful man. Upon the wealthy man's return, he is proud to give every penny of the money back to him. I cannot help but wonder how things might have turned out had the first two put the money in a high-risk venture and lost it all?

The point of this parable is really not about doubling your money, or accumulating wealth. It is about how you choose to live your life. It is about taking risks. It is about what Jesus is about to do and what Jesus expects of them (and us) when he is gone.

You see, the greatest risk is not to care enough, not to care deeply and profoundly enough about anything to invest deeply, to give your whole heart away and in the process, risk everything. The greatest risk of all, as a Christ-follower, is to play it safe, to live cautiously, and prudently. Sloth, one of the ancient churches seven deadly sins, is to not care, not love, not rejoice, not live up to the full potential of our humanity.

Dietrich Bonhoffer said that "the sin of respectable people is running from responsibility. Bonhoffer believed this to the point that he lost his own life for plotting the assassination of Adolph Hitler.

As disciples of Jesus Christ, sent out together to be salt and light, we manifest joy even in the face of temporal defeat. The fellowship of the Holy Spirit binds us together in community, those once estranged and hostile to each other, the good and the bad, gathered together in the name of our Lord. You see, giving our whole lives to Jesus Christ requires RISK. It is not enough to sit around tables and talk about it. We must get up and take the risk of working against the empire on behalf of the oppressed, knowing that calling Jesus "Lord" means belonging to a family of not my own choosing, knowing that together we can question the assumptions and the complacency of this world.

How many of you have been outraged by the number of children in Davidson County who have been in the news in recent weeks and months, not for their achievements, but because of the abuse and neglect they have suffered at the hands of adults in their lives? Seven children in one household in Lexington a few weeks ago, living in such horrible conditions that we find it hard to talk about...and so we don't. And this week, as a result of the apathy and silence, the bond was reduced and the couple was released from jail. And still others have been arrested for sexually assaulting an 8 year-old, and others have been removed from sub-human conditions. Do we dare to care? Should we invest our time, talents, emotions in such issues RIGHT HERE around us?

As we meet, and read, listen, and learn, advocate, protest, preach, teach and even march when necessary; or even if we choose to risk nothing and bury our talents, time and money in the safety of the damp, dark, ground be reminded that we do so not for the sake of a cause, but in the name Jesus Christ, who calls us into community, the loved community, the sent community, the broader community that includes strangers/neighbors as we bear witness to the promises of God. And we neither fear nor accept present realities because we know the *End of the Story*.