

A sermon preached by the Rev. Richard C. Israel, Associate Rector, on Nov. 13, 2011 at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, OH

Earlier this week I received an e-newsletter from the company that manages my retirement accounts. One of the articles that caught my eye as I quickly scanned it was one that offered a primer about the different financial indexes whose mercurial “ups and downs” greet us every morning, especially with this past week’s economic news from Europe. In the midst of this article there was a link to a “risk tolerance quiz” one could take to ascertain the level of risk with which one is comfortable. Spurred by curiosity and sermon procrastination, I took the quick ten question quiz. As the son of an accountant who was raised in the Great Depression, I wasn’t surprised to learn that my “risk tolerance” is one of “moderation”, not conservative, but nowhere close to aggressive.

The “risk tolerance quiz” came to mind as I read the parable that we just heard. Imagine my surprise when the first commentary I read on this passage began with an explanation of what wealth managers call the “rule of 72”. For those of you who, like me, have never heard of this rule it is a simple formula for determining how long it will take to double one’s money given one’s risk tolerance. For example, if you are a moderate investor like me and hope your retirement income will generate a 5% return, you can divide the interest rate into 72 and the answer will be the number of years it takes to double your money. Five percent into 72 equals 14 ½ years. If you want to double your money more quickly the risk escalates dramatically. In the world of venture capital, I’m told, only about one out of four or five—some say one out of ten—makes it. The other times you lose—everything.

Jesus told the Parable of the Talents in the middle of his own personal high-risk venture. The setting is in Jerusalem where he will soon be betrayed and crucified. This parable is the third of four stories Matthew records in the 24th and 25th chapters of his Gospel in which Jesus tells his followers how to live as we await the end times. Interpreted allegorically, the master in the parable represents Jesus whose leaving points to his Ascension to the Father; the slaves entrusted with the talents represent the church. The return of Jesus, the master, is depicted as the fullness of the reign of God at the end times.

Details abound in the parable and all are illuminating. The first and foremost is the lavishness of grace. The master entrusts his slaves, not his wealth managers, with staggering wealth. A talent, according to Biblical scholars, was roughly akin to the wages a day laborer would earn in 15 years of work. While the three slaves in the parable receive different numbers of talents, all are treated with generosity beyond imagining, based on the master’s assessment of each one’s capabilities. Then the master goes away for a long time, entrusting his wealth to the slaves and giving them total freedom to use the talents at their disposal in any way they see fit until his return. We cannot begin to understand this parable unless we start from the perspective of the master’s generosity.

In part two of the parable Jesus tells how the slaves respond to the master’s direction. The first two, undoubtedly intuiting the “rule of 72”, invest everything they have received and double their money. The 3rd slave, the one given the single talent, conducts his affairs differently. He digs a hole in the ground and buries the money so upon the master’s return he will be able to look him in the eye and account for every last cent entrusted to him. To Jesus’ listeners, the 3rd slave is not acting badly. Rabbinical law held that a man who had buried property entrusted to him had taken the safest course

and was not liable for its loss. Imagine the shock to Jesus' audience when they hear how the parable ends.

The Master's return and the subsequent judgment he renders to the three slaves makes up the longest and most detailed part of the parable. The 5 talent and 2 talent slaves are positive examples of how Christians are to conduct themselves in the present. When the master calls them to report, they do so with confidence and joy. They have acted with faithfulness, imitating their master and discovering the fulfillment of living with passion and purpose. The master's judgment on them is as staggering as the initial outlay of treasure he had given them. They are no longer slaves, but "partners".

The one talent slave, on the other hand, views the master as a "harsh" man. The actual translation of the Greek is more graphic. *Skleros*, the word translated as "harsh" carries the connotations of one who is ruthless, merciless, singularly unpleasant and mean. Despite the master's largess, this slave was afraid of the master. Living in fear, he buried the treasure to cover his butt. He chose to sit in a darkness of his own devising, letting his warped view of the master color his life with resentment, dread, fear, and loathing. The judgment he receives from the Master is really only a ratification of the life he chose for himself.

The point of the parable is not that God rewards only those who are successful. Commenting on this parable, Robert Farrar Capon said, "The master is a businessman. He knows the risk involved in making business deals. He knows what it is like when a deal goes sour. Therefore, if the first two who invested their money had lost it all, he wouldn't have punished them for it. They did what he asked them to do. That's what counts. He would tell them exactly the same thing, 'Well done, good and faithful servants. Enter into the joy of your master.'"

The point of the parable is not about stewardship which is the way this text is often treated. The parable is an invitation to the adventure of faith: the high-risk venture of being a disciple of Jesus Christ, who disdained personal security to redeem the world. John Buchanan writes, "The greatest risk of all, it turns out, is not to risk anything, not to care deeply and profoundly enough about anything to invest deeply, to give your heart away and in the process risk everything. The greatest risk of all is to play it safe, to live cautiously and prudently."

There is one more dimension to this parable that is important for us to keep in mind. It is not primarily addressed to us as individuals, but to the church which is the servant entrusted with showing the world that the life-giving love of God can overcome the fearful "play it safe", isolating wisdom of the world. A number of years ago I was in a call process at a church. In the course of an interview I asked the members of the call committee to tell me how their church was perceived in the community. There was an awkward silence for an extended period of time. Finally, someone remembered that a local hardware store who admired the church's well manicured grounds thanked them by giving the church a new lawn mower.

Unfortunately, at one time or another, I, too have been guilty of domesticating the gospel and living in a way that circumscribed faith to a set of beliefs to which one may subscribe intellectually, even if they leave us feeling dry and bored. What this parable of Jesus tells us is that the outcome of playing it safe, not risking anything, is akin to death. As I reflect on the vitality of this parish in which I feel so privileged to serve I can't help but give thanks for the risks of faith that have led us ever deeper into the heart of God. Some of the images that come to mind include an overflow crowd gathered to hear Martin Luther King, Jr. at a time when his message was viewed as threatening; "opening our church

doors” to school children who were in need of support and guidance; inviting people who differed about the church’s decisions on sexuality to come to “covenant groups” in which we could practice listening and reconciliation; investing our parish in mission outreach partnerships all over the world that give us new friends and new perspectives on global issues of wealth and poverty; and more recently, making a commitment to the work of justice and peace in our community through Greater Cleveland Congregations.

All of these ventures carried “risks” and we continue to wrestle with the need to practice listening and reconciliation as we discern God’s Spirit leading us into ever more difficult, complex and controversial issues. Yet, with these risks taken in faith, we have been blessed with a vitality and joy that we could not imagine. At yesterday’s Diocesan Convention our Bishop laid out a vision that is founded on what God might do through us for future generations that we can’t even imagine. He concluded his address by talking about how an equestrian gets her horse to jump a fence. The equestrian can only get her horse to make that jump by first throwing her heart over the fence. It is through leaps of faith that we have learned that faith is multiplied as we follow Jesus, who risked his life that we might know the joy of living in a way that defies fear and is capable of building a world of peace and justice.