

Sermon Prepared by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes for Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia
Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, November 15, 2020

(Matthew 25:14-30)

In our lectionary cycle of readings, passages of scripture circle back every three years. The reading we just heard from Matthew's Gospel, for instance, won't be back as a Sunday reading until late in the season of Pentecost in 2023. The tremendous gap between each occurrence of these readings is in some respects a gift. The elapsed time grants preachers new opportunities to revisit old familiar themes or perhaps discover something new that is uncovered in the text.

When I preached on this particular passage three years ago – a few months, in fact, after I had arrived here in Millwood – I took the opportunity to explore the idea of *risk*. That is after all what we find in this parable from Jesus: three unnamed slaves who have been entrusted with their master's money and essentially take risks with what they have been given. The one who received five talents for instance took a risk by trading with them and doubled that amount. Likewise the one given two talents took a risk by trading with them and came back with four. The one given a single talent, however, made what was calculated to be the safe bet by burying that one talent in the ground ... an action that in hindsight ended up being the biggest risk of all, one that had the greatest downside.

Now, three years later I revisited this passage, thinking something new might reveal itself. Instead, I found myself once again focused on that word: *risk*. These past several months of COVID and the ways that life has changed have certainly changed how many look at that word. The risk I am thinking about today, though, is not a *noun* but a *verb*. The risk I am thinking about today is not *something we receive*, but an *action we take*.

Are we willing to act?

Strictly in terms of attendance numbers, the national Episcopal Church is a denomination in decline. In the 1960s there were 3.4 million Episcopalians. Last year, that number was 1.8 million. There has been a more than 17% decline in just the last 10 years, and it's a decline we even see here in our own diocese. Now I would wager that if you got 10 people together in a room and asked them why this is true, you would get 10 different answers. You may hear that the Church isn't doing enough to reach the younger generations. Someone else may say that we're too wedded to old traditions and ways of doing things. We may hear some say that the liturgies developed more than 40 years ago no longer speak to everyone.

I'm not here this morning to offer a definitive, all-encompassing answer; I simply don't have one. What I *do* have are questions: what will *we* risk to reverse the trend? What will *we* risk to grow the Church? What will *we* risk to reach the younger generations? What will *we* risk to develop new traditions? What will *we* risk to ensure that our worship and liturgy stop turning people away and instead start drawing them in? What will *we* risk to make those who think God has left them far behind see that God is in fact closer than they ever imagined?

Two thousand years ago, the first followers of Jesus risked and often lost the most important thing they had: *their lives*. A number of the apostles were executed because they professed the truth of a resurrected Christ in direct opposition to the rule of an earthly emperor. Peter. James. Paul. Stephen. Andrew. Thomas. Philip. Matthew. Bartholomew. Simon. Matthias. They followed the one who was crucified with common criminals and resurrected as the one who defeated death, and in so doing they risked their own deaths.

The English bishops Hugh Latimer, Nicholas Ridley and Thomas Cranmer professed their Protestant faith despite incredible pressure from a Catholic monarch, risking their lives but maintaining their faith and refusing to compromise their beliefs. In fact, spend time exploring the history of our Christian faith and you will find countless examples of women and men who *willingly risked all* to spread the good news of the incarnate God and the salvation made possible by the man Jesus who went to the cross on behalf of all humanity.

Don't worry; I'm *not* asking anyone to be a martyr. What I *am* asking is that we consider the risks we can take to grow the Church, here and in the wider world. Consider risks we might be willing to take to share the love of Christ with even more of the community. Consider risks we might be willing to take to attract and welcome people to our little subset of the family of God here in Millwood. Consider risks we might be willing to take so that that attracting and welcoming isn't rooted in the inaction of waiting for people to *come to us* but is instead rooted in the action of *going to them*.

When we take risks, we're stepping out of our comfort zone. That's what a risk is – leaving what's comfortable – and it's an important thing to recognize: important because it requires *action*. It means that we have to move from being passive observers and participants to becoming active apostles and prophets. It means that we stop waiting for people to come from the margins where they live and start going to them at the margins. I'll even take that a step further: it means eliminating the margins completely so that no one feels marginalized.

So now, in this stewardship season and beyond, what will we do? What risks will we take ... with our time, our talent, and our treasure? Will we be like the one who took the single talent and cautiously buried it, *hoping* for the best? Or will we be the one with the five talents who risked it all and *achieved* the best?

Amen.