

*Risky Business*

Whitefish UMC

Matthew 25:14-30

November 16, 2008

- † Who can forget Tom Cruise in the film scene that catapulted him to stardom in 1983? Okay, maybe you have forgotten. In case you have, it was that dance in the movie called “Risky Business,” in which Tom Cruise plays air guitar in only a pink dress shirt, underwear (tighty whities, as the kids call them), and socks.
- † It’s such a famous scene that someone reported that a fellow dressed up as Tom Cruise in “Risky Business” for Halloween in downtown Whitefish. It’s iconic, really—Michael Phelps, Alex Rodriguez, and a bunch of other famous guys mimicked it in a TV ad for the latest version of “Guitar Hero.”
- † Certainly Tom Cruise took a risk appearing in his underwear in “Risky Business.” His character in the film, too, takes increasingly greater risks with his parents’ stuff and his future as the movie progresses. And they are not exactly the kinds of investments we want to encourage.
- † The parable of the five talents is also about risky business, though not of the kind in which Tom Cruise engaged. I confess that it is the second parable in Matthew’s gospel that I wish Jesus had never told. But he did. A version of it appears in Luke’s gospel, as well.
- † Jesus told this story in the middle of his own personal high-risk venture. It was during the last few days of his life. Earlier he had made a risky decision to leave the safety of rural Galilee, where he

- was among his own people who welcomed him wherever he went and listened to his teachings.
- † But he decided to leave the safety of Galilee and go to Jerusalem, the capital city, where the religious authorities would view him and his teachings as a threat rather than a blessing.
  - † And those were his own people! The Romans, would, of course, receive him as a disturber of the peace and the status quo. And he couldn't have chosen a worse time, at least if it was safety he was worried about. For every year the provincial Roman governor, Pilate, himself moved to city during Passover.
  - † The city would be crawling with Roman soldiers. His friends tried to talk him out of it. And now that they were in the city, their worst fears were being realized. As they entered the city, a crowd of poor people gathered around him laying down leafy branches and yelling, "Hosanna in the highest heavens. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!" That kind of talk was only reserved for the Messiah—the king—the ruler—not for some itinerant preacher.
  - † Then, as if to seal his fate, Jesus went to the temple and physically and verbally assaulted the moneychangers. The religious leaders were already talking to the Roman government about getting rid of him. It was at that very moment that he told them this story.
  - † A wealthy man goes away on a long journey. Before he departs, he distributes his property to three slaves. Wonder if they called him the "great redistributor" as did some in the recent presidential campaign when referring to Barack Obama. The money the man divides is a great sum.

- † The first slave takes the money to the market, to a wealth management firm and invests in high risk ventures. The second one does the same, putting the money to work at a high risk. Surprisingly, both do very well. Both receive an outrageously high return on their investments. So high that it would have been considered almost stealing the money from someone else.
- † But the third slave takes a very different approach with his money. He digs a hole and buries it in the ground for safekeeping. How ironic that in these troubled times of ours, we'd be feeling pretty good if we had done that with our and our parents' money.
- † There are a couple of ways of understanding this parable. It's often used during stewardship season to encourage congregations to risk giving their money extravagantly to the work of the church.
- † On the other hand, some scholars, including Ched Myers and those who see the parables from the "underside" of conventional wisdom, say that Jesus is warning against the kind of ruler who rewards some for using money to gain personally from the resources of others.
- † The landowner, they say, is not a hidden allegorical allusion to God, but to Rome and the religious authorities. The parable, according to this interpretation, is a veiled attack on greed at the expense of the poor and the ordinary person.
- † Other interpreters believe the parable is about the risk of not being ambitious enough with your own life for the work of the kingdom of God. For centuries the parable has haunted our forebears. Samuel Johnson, the great 18<sup>th</sup> century English man of letters, was tormented to the point of despair over the judgment this story promised to those who don't make good use of their talents.

† And John Milton, author of *Paradise Lost*, who was stricken by blindness before beginning his great work, was overwhelmed by the possibility that he would fail to return his talent.

† In wrestling with this possibility, he wrote a poem on his blindness that ponders the parable”

*When I consider how my light is spent  
Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,  
And that one talent which is death to hide  
Lodged with me useless...*

† But look closer at the third slave in the parable. He is not a bad person. In fact he is prudent, careful, cautious. He knows that his master is harsh and unforgiving. He has seen his master consume the life savings of little people without a second thought. He’s not about to take chances with his money.

† So he buries it, keeps it safe, and for his efforts is treated as harshly as anyone in the whole Bible. The master berates him verbally and then kicks him off the property, redistributing the money to the other two investors.

† Do you wonder at all what might have happened if the high risk investors had lost all their money? Would the master have been less harsh—to either the risky guys or the cautious one? I don’t know.

† All we can do is learn from the example of the one who told the parable, Jesus. If we look at his life, we see him not as cautious, prudent, careful. Indeed he is just the opposite.

† So I don’t think this parable is so much about money as it is about life. Of course the two are connected. But ultimately it’s about using your money and your life to risk following the kingdom path of Jesus.

- † Jesus tells this story near the end of his life to look back on what he has done and forward to what he is about to do. He tells this parable to remind the disciples of his hopes and expectations for them after he is gone.
- † Because the riskiest business of all, it turns out, is not to risk anything, is not to care deeply and profoundly enough about anything to invest deeply, to give your heart away, and in that process risk everything.
- † Comfort. Security. These are the great desires of our culture and our time. I confess that they are two of my greatest temptations. Because of my family history, stability and caution are much to be desired. Sure, I took a risk (and so did my family) when I left a good-paying job with lots of prestige to become a pastor in 1995.
- † But there are times when I have indeed played it safe. When rather than upset a comfortable existence, I have held back in my discipleship. For the truth is, for most of us, faith is more a personal comfort zone than a risk. It's about personal security, life in the here and in the hereafter.
- † Isn't it more about believing in a set of ideas to which we commit intellectually? Isn't it about getting our personal theology right and then living a good life and avoiding bad things? Not really too risky, this faith.
- † John Buchanan quotes the author Madeleine L'Engle, (who wrote *A Wrinkle in Time* for children and several wonderful books for adults). She recalled a line from T. S. Eliot's *J Alfred Prufrock*, "Do I dare disturb the universe?"
- † L'Engle calls Jesus a "universe disturber," to ask, "Dare I be one?" "It's a question we need to ask with courage," she says, "as we look at

- what's going on around the world with wars in the name of religion accelerating all over the planet, each group claiming to represent the Truth, and occasionally proclaiming it with acts of terrorism.”
- † Playing it safe, Madeleine L'Engle says, “leads to personal diminishment and death.” Certainly Jesus didn't play it safe, and neither ought we to play it safe as his body in our world.
  - † Imagine how tempting it would have been for the disciples, on hearing Jesus' parable, to think that after he was gone, they could scatter and return to their former lives—their fishing boats, villages, and homes.
  - † But after the resurrection do you suppose they remembered this story? Was it in part what gave them the courage to take Jesus' ministry forward? And when they did, did they not feel wondrously alive?
  - † John Buchanan says it so beautifully that I quote him now: “And so it is finally his bidding, his invitation to you and me. He invites us to be his disciples, to live our lives as fully as possible by investing them, by risking, by expanding the horizons of our responsibilities.
  - † To be his man or woman, he said, is not so much about believing ideas about him as it is following him. It is a conversion of heart and mind and also our worldview, our outlook, and our behavior.
  - † It is to experience renewed responsibility for the use and investment of these precious lives of ours. It is to know yourself as responsible for the lives of those dear to you and the life of the community and nation and the world.
  - † It is to be bold and brave, to reach high and care deeply. It is to hurt when brothers and sisters hurt, to be impatient and angry at injustice, to weep at the world's brokenness and rejoice at its goodness and beauty.”

- † I would add that it is also about your money. Today we begin our annual mission of giving to the Heifer Project. We make what might be perceived as a foolish, risky investment of our money in the life of someone who doesn't have much and needs help. Funny, though, how it pays such high returns—all in a sheep or a goat or a hive of bees or a clutch of rabbits. All in sustainable livelihood and hope for the least of these that Jesus came to serve with his life.
- † Did you know that there is an organization called “Five Talents International” based on this parable? Its mission is to empower the poor by promoting innovative savings and microcredit programs, business training, and spiritual development.
- † Hear the result of one of these risky investments: “After Joy’s husband died of malaria, she found herself alone, taking care of six children in the Kabale District of Uganda, near the Rwanda border. Instead of giving up in despair, she started a brick-making business.
- † With a small loan of \$150 and some savings, she was able to purchase a small piece of land and employ eight people to make bricks....Since 2003 she has gotten several additional loans to enlarge her brick-making business and has expanded into growing potatoes and operating a small store. The profits from her business allow her to educate her children and hire 13 employees, who now can support their families as well.”
- † Risky business indeed. And a lot more satisfying than a young Tom Cruise in his underwear. Let’s close with these lines from George Bernard Shaw’s *Man and Superman*:
- † “This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being a force of nature instead of a

- feverish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.”
- † And Shaw looked forward to the time of self-assessment at the end of life: “I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no ‘brief candle’ to me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.”
  - † So, new members and not-so new ones. Seekers and visitors, “What about it?” Will you accept the invitation to the risky business of following Jesus Christ?
  - † With praise and thanksgiving, Amen.

Sources:

John Buchanan, “High Risk Venture,” <http://fourthchurch.org>

Ched Myers and Eric DeBode, “Towering Trees and Talented Slaves,” in [www.lwwdc.org](http://www.lwwdc.org)

[www.fivetalents.org](http://www.fivetalents.org)

Samuel T. Lloyd, “Are You Ambitious Enough?” [www.csec.org](http://www.csec.org)