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Psalm 90:1-8, 12
Matthew 25:14-30

“Faith, and Fear”

Faith and Fear often collide. Like happened here in this story Jesus told during the last week of his life. Though perhaps here, for Jesus and his followers, faith and fear are walking cautiously side by side.

Some weeks earlier Jesus had made a high-risk decision to leave the safety of rural Galilee, where he was among his own people and where crowds of people welcomed him and were astonished by his teachings and healings.

But now he has left the safety of Galilee and is in Jerusalem, the capital city, where the **religious authorities** regarded him as a threat to their own power and privileges, and the **Romans** knew him as a disturber of the peace. Jerusalem would be crawling with Roman soldiers. His friends tried to talk him out of making the trip, but now that they were there and the worst seemed to be happening. As he entered Jerusalem he stirred up a crowd with a noisy street demonstration. And to make matters worse, he had gone to the temple, and there clashed with the religious leaders and apparently assaulted the moneychangers. The religious authorities were already talking to the Roman officials about getting rid of him. And at those very moments Jesus told his followers (and anyone willing to listen) this story.

It is about a wealthy man who goes away on a long journey. But before he leaves, he distributes his property to three slaves. It is a great deal of money (a talent equaled 15 years of wages). The first slave takes the money to an astute wealth manager and invests in high-risk ventures. The second slave does the same thing, puts the money to work and at high risk. And both do very well. In time, their master returns, and he is very pleased. "Well done, you have been faithful" he says. And he promises that they will receive more responsibility in the future...and joy within the household.

The third slave, however, takes a very different approach with his money, his one talent. He hid it in the ground. He dug a hole and put it all into the ground for safekeeping.

He is not a bad man. He is, in fact, a prudent, careful, cautious investor. He knows his master to be harsh and unforgiving. He's not about to take chances with the money. No way. So he buries it. And it's all there in the ground, every penny of it, so when his master returns this third slave is proud of himself. "Here it is. All of it, safe and sound."

And for his very prudent efforts, his master treats him as harshly as anyone in the whole Bible. His master doesn't compliment him for his prudence and caution but calls him wicked and lazy. He takes the money back and distributes it to the other two. He calls him worthless and kicks him out of the household.

It's just a story, of course, and these parables of Jesus, we know, usually have a single point, but I can't help but wonder how it would have turned out had the first two slaves who put the money in high-risk ventures ... **what if they then had lost it all**. Jesus didn't tell it that way, of course, but I can't help but imagine that the master would have been far less harsh with them. He might even have applauded their effort because the point here is not really about doubling your money and accumulating wealth....

Rather, the point Jesus is making here is about living.

It's about investing life.

It's about taking risks.

It's about Jesus himself and what he has accomplished and what is about to happen with him.

And mostly it's about what he hopes and expects of his followers after he's gone.

It's a faithful way of life Jesus is urging.

It's about being a follower of Jesus and what it means to be faithful to him.

And so, most importantly, this story is about you and me.

The greatest risk of all, it turns out, **is to not risk anything**,

The greatest risk of all is to not care deeply and profoundly about anything.

The greatest risk of all, it turns out, is to play it safe, to live cautiously and prudently.

To dig a hole, and preserve the gift, safe and sound.

The human predicament is not simply that we are proud and think too highly of ourselves, but it's that we don't think highly enough, don't reach far enough, or care deeply enough, or invest enough of ourselves.

Theology identifies sin as pride and egotism.

Martin Luther said (at least in part) sin is the self, turning in upon itself.

Presbyterians (at least in part) say sin is rebellion against God; we hide from our Creator.

That's all true, I believe. And there is another lens through which to view the human dilemma. It's called **sloth**, one of the ancient church's seven deadly sins. Sloth means not caring, not loving, not rejoicing,

Sloth is apathy. Not living up to our God-given potential, playing it safe, cautious, sensible, digging a hole and burying our potential in the ground.

How important is Sloth in shaping our attitudes? Historians observe that whenever dictators and tyrants and despots of any kind rear their ugly heads, it's because too many people have stopped caring about the life of the community and the nation. And we have something like an epidemic of that at this moment in our nation.

In the most recent election, across our nation only 33 percent of the eligible voters took the trouble to go to the polls and vote. Interviews since, turned up lackadaisical indifference, a heightened cynicism about the political process. "It's all corrupt; it's all in the hands of big money, big lobbies, and special interest groups with enormous resources. What can I do? Why bother? Why get invested in it?"

And I thought about Vaclav Havel, a Czech writer who spent years in prison as a dissident and then after the collapse of the communist state was elected President of the new Czech Republic. He wrote, "The salvation of this human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart . . . in human responsibility.

Responsibility to something higher than my family, my time, my country, my success."

And I thought about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a martyr, executed by the Nazis a few weeks before the end of the Second World War. Bonhoeffer wrote, "The sin of respectable people is running from responsibility." Bonhoeffer, a pacifist, took his own responsibility so seriously he joined the resistance and helped plan an assassination attempt on Hitler's life. His sense of responsibility cost him his own life.

How important is this personally, in terms of how you and I live our lives? Jesus' warning is that the outcome of playing it safe, not caring, not loving passionately, not investing ourselves, not risking anything, is something akin to death, like being banished to outer darkness.

Now, for most of us, religion, our personal faith, has not seemed like a high-risk venture. In fact, faith has seemed to be something like the opposite.

Faith has seemed to be a personal comfort zone.

Faith, we think, is about personal security, here and in the hereafter.

Faith, we think, is no more risky than believing ideas in our heads about God and Jesus,

Faith is a list of beliefs to which we more or less subscribe intellectually.

Faith, we think—because this is what we've been taught—is getting our personal theology correct and then living a good life by avoiding bad things.

Faith, we think, is a quite timid, non-risky venture.

I suspect that's pretty much what Jesus' friends thought too. And I imagine they were as stunned by this peculiar story when they thought about it as we are thinking about it this morning.

It's about Jesus, of course. He took the precious gift of his 33-year-old life, and out of his love for God, his passionate love for the reign of God, his deep and fervent love for his nation and his neighbors, put his life on the line, and

invested it all, holding nothing back, risking everything by going up to Jerusalem.

And Jesus was talking about the 12 of them, his closest followers, sitting there wishing that they were back in the friendly confines of Galilee, wishing that Jesus hadn't risked so much.

Secretly planning, I suspect, that if somehow they got out of this alive, they would head north, just as quickly as possible, back to their homes, and the safety of the rolling hills and little villages. Back to their fishing boats.

And it was at least in part this story, this pointed parable, that caught their attention, and, I believe, started to turn them around. It was this little story that got them to thinking that the way to be faithful to Jesus and to his vision of the kingdom of God ...

was to invest their own lives,
not to scurry for safety, but to plunge ahead,
to take chances, to speak out, to go public,
to put it all on the line.

I suspect that it was this story that helped them see that in him, investing it all in his kingdom ...
in his way of living ... they were becoming,
wondrously alive.

And so it is Jesus' invitation to you and me.

He invites us to be his followers, 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, is not so much believing ideas about him as it is following him.

It is a conversion of heart and mind and also of 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 ourselves as responsible for the lives of those dear to us 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 to rejoice at its goodness
and beauty.

Two weeks ago I was going through an old box – marked, BOB'S STUFF. Pat and I have been carrying this box around with us for quite a number of years. I was to go through it and sort things out it out before we moved last spring. Well, about two weeks ago or so I found it right next to my desk. The hint was taken. I opened the box and found a lot of old family pictures.

Also, dairies of my mother's recording her first days in college, letters she wrote while she was travelling in Europe back in the early 1920's ... written to the man she would soon marry. And there were some college notes of my father's. One had a quote from George Bernard Shaw. "Learn this," my father scrawled in the margin. *"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 selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy."*

"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 flickering candle to me. It is kind of a splendid torch which I have gotten hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations."

"Man and Superman"

George Bernard Shaw 1903

And so Jesus' invites us to the adventure of faith: yes, it is a little scary. It mixes faith with fear, this high-risk venture of being a follower of Jesus Christ. And our response makes all the difference for ourselves, for our dear church, our community, our world. Beware. Don't bury yourself in the ground. You are worth so much more than that.