

“Taking Risks with God’s Abundance”

Sermon: Year A, Pentecost 24, Proper 28, Lectionary 33

Text: Matthew 25:14–30

Preached: November 19, 2017 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, Illinois

Grace and peace to you from the God of Abundance, and from our Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN

As we begin, I want you to take a moment to think of a time in your life when you took a risk. *[pause]* Remember the feelings associated with that? The uncertainty...the thrill of possibility...the fear...? Maybe it was that moment of deciding whether to say yes to a marriage proposal...that choice to quit a job to start a new career...that decision to buy a house...that decision to leave an abusive relationship. Maybe it was a situation that was suddenly thrust upon you. Maybe it was nothing quite so momentous...maybe it was one of those everyday kinds of risk-taking. Think for a moment about standing at that moment: looking behind you and around you, wondering whether you should release your grasp on what you know at that moment, and step out into the unknown. The thoughts racing through your head: How hard is this going to be? What will it require of me? Will I fail? What will become of me, of my family, of those I love? Does disaster and shortage await me? Or conversely, will I succeed? Will taking this step open up to me presently unimagined experiences of joy?

I think most of us experience the full range of emotions and thoughts when we reach those decision points in our lives, those moments of risk. As I reflected on what some of those have been for me, I thought about a number of things: the choice between staying close to home to go to college, attending the Baptist university my parents imagined for me, or to heading off to Evanston, the other end of the earth from Texas--the only state I had ever lived in or even been to—to study a subject that even I couldn’t really imagine what I would do with it. (That subject was Medieval French literature, by the way!) There was the decision to go and spend a year studying in France, though I didn’t know where the money was to come from, and worried about what I would do when I got there. Or the decision to leave a 13-year relationship that was fundamentally flawed and destructive. And then there was the question of whether to give up a 25-year career in publishing to go to seminary, without any assurance that at the end of four years and the depletion of my savings that I would even be allowed to be ordained. But then there were all those little risks, as well, all along the way.

Looking back, I realize how those decisions, those risks, even though they meant dying to one thing, letting go of the thing I knew at a given point in my life, somehow in that letting go I’ve ended up finding something entirely new and creative and full of possibility, things that have transformed me. Of course, there have been other risks I’ve taken that have not ended up as I dreamed, as I hoped. And sometimes risk-taking means grieving the choices, the paths, that have not led to where I had hoped they would lead.

Today’s gospel lesson addresses that realm of possibility, that domain of risk. The wealthy man entrusts to three slaves three different amounts of money. Our word “talent” meaning “gifts and abilities” is not the original sense of the word. Rather, a “talent” was a very large sum of money that represented approximately 20 times the annual wage of a laborer. So one of the slaves receives 100 years of wages as his trust. Another receives 40 years of wages to take care of. The third receives 20 years of wages. And then the landowner goes away for a very long time. The slaves are suddenly faced with a decision that each of them must make: What are they going to do with the master’s wealth that has been entrusted to them?

The first slave weighs the risks, and sees exciting possibilities. He takes the money and immediately goes to the bankers. He says to them, “Here, I’ve been entrusted with this vast sum of money. Let’s work with it, and see what can happen.” And so they invest the money. The story doesn’t say, but there may well have been some failed investments along the way. There probably were moments at which the slave worried that maybe he had made some bad choices. But he decides to spread that wealth around, to put it to work, to enter into relationships that can help it grow, in spite of the risks. And there are obviously some great successes, such that at the end of the time of waiting for the master to get back, the money has doubled: five talents have become ten. And the master, thrilled at the return on the trust that he has given the slave, says, “Well done, you good and faithful servant! Enter into the joy of your master.” The risk, the effort, has led to joy. And the experience of the second slave is the same. Even though she has been entrusted with less, nonetheless she has been active with what she has been given, and she, too, is praised and invited to enter into the joy of the master.

And then we have the third slave. That slave, even though he has been entrusted with the smallest amount, has been the one who has been most risk-avoidant. In his fear of the master, in his fear of failure, in his fear of letting go of what he has, has taken the easy route, the route he thinks is the safest: He has taken the money and buried it. In rabbinic law, if you were entrusted with a sum of money for safekeeping, if you buried it to protect it, even if it was found and dug up and stolen, you would not be blamed for its loss. So, he's doing what he thinks will help him avoid blame. All he's worried about is saving his own skin. He's not thinking about the possibility of growing what he has been given, about the joy that might await him if he took that money and used it for his master's benefit. He cares more about the master's displeasure if he doesn't succeed than he cares about the possibility of joy if he does. He projects onto the master his fears, paints the master as harsh and capricious, and uses that as his reason to stand there with that muddy hoard of coinage, ripe with the musty stench of long burial, just as he received it, with nothing more to show for it than when he began. It hasn't even occurred to him that the act of using what he has been given, of seeing it grow and flourish, of watching it make a difference for the master's purposes, could lead to joy.

Prof. David Lose says, "And here's the thing: I wonder how often this happens in our relationship with God. We imagine God primarily as an enforcer of rules, and we get hung up by the legalism of religion. We visualize God as stern and prone to punishment, and we come to believe that everything bad in our lives is punishment from God. We see God as arbitrary and capricious, and that's what we experience, a fickle and unsympathetic God who meets our expectations. On the other hand, when we view God primarily in terms of grace, we are surprised and uplifted by the numerous gifts and moments of grace we experience all around us. And when we imagine God to be a God of love, we find it far easier to experience God's love in our own lives and to share it with others. What you see, all too often, is just what you get."

Ultimately, this parable is not about money at all. It's not about talents. It's about our ability to believe that ours is a God who can be trusted, a God who can be loved, a God who is inviting us into creative use of what God has entrusted us with, a God of abundance who is inviting us into an abundant, joy-filled future, rather than a God of condemnation and scarcity. It's about looking at what we've been entrusted with as gracious gift to be used extravagantly, to be invested in the life of the world, not as a private treasure that we are to turn back over intact with the dirt of burial still clinging to it. We're not all given the same resources—but we are all asked to use what we have been given, to risk letting go of things, of giving them away, even of dying to some things, in order to live into a greater vision of what God is doing in this world, where God is leading. That is the creative risk that Christ is calling us to. The way of dying to things and rising to new life is God's very own way.

Not every risk will be a large risk. In the very next verses, which we will hear next week, Jesus talks about those small investments that we may not even realize are investments: a cup of water for a thirsty person, a meal for a hungry person, a visit to a sick person, a word of encouragement to a prisoner. And yet, those are the acts, the investments of our lives and time and resources, that end up bearing much fruit, Jesus says, and that end up leading us into joy. In the parable we hear next week, it is those who have been complacent, who have thought that they don't have to do anything more than fear God, who find themselves without the realization of joy. It is those who have used the gifts they've been given for others who will know full joy.

So, what are the risks God is calling you to take that will bring joy to the Master? What are the risks God is calling us to take as the assembly of God's people here? What do we need to invest in our neighbors, in our world, in order for God's resources to grow and bring joy? What might we need to let go of so that the work of abundance can take place?

May God grant us all the grace to trust that our God is indeed a God of abundance and a God of joy, who invites us into abundant life, into resurrected life, who calls us to die and rise, to risk so that new life can come, just as he laid down his life in order to rise again and bring us joy. AMEN