

FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“THE PROBLEM WITH ABUNDANCE OF CAUTION”

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 25: 14-30

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, August 4, 2024
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Matthew 25: 14-30

The Parable of the Talents

14 “For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; 15 to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. 16 The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them and made five more talents. 17 In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. 18 But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. 19 After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. 20 Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.’ 21 His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ 22 And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.’ 23 His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ 24 Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; 25 so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ 26 But his master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? 27 Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return, I would have received what was my own with interest. 28 So take the talent from him and give it to the one with the ten talents. 29 For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. 30 As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

The Problem with Abundance of Caution

Leader: The word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Let us pray...

Almighty and Everlasting God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing, acceptable, and even joyful in your sight, for you are our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Let's not let anyone fool us into thinking that life does not involve a measure of risk. Leaving our house this morning is a measure of risk. Don't you think? Some folks walked to church today, though most of us got behind a 20,000-pound vehicle in which a combustion engine controlled thousands of small explosions, moving pistons up and down taking us from there to here. We take risks every day, whether we realize it or not. How many of us have turned on our phones this morning or used technology of any kind? Or engaged in a financial transaction or maybe this afternoon we want to go to the beach for a quick swim or head to the pool or some other form of physical activity. All risks.

Granted, there are some risks that we are not at all inclined to take. I have the nerve to say that if you see me jumping out of a plane, look for the guy who pushed me. To be certain in life and living, while there are some risks that we are willing to take, there are other risks that we'd just as soon avoid. Though risks are a part of life, and most of the time we approach them with an appropriate measure of caution, we are prudent. We are prepared. But sometimes we operate with excess caution. And this morning, I want us to consider that when it comes to matters of faith, out of an abundance of caution we can sometimes adversely hinder our spiritual growth.

I have a friend whose life details I'll change just for the sake of anonymity. He lost his job and, for the better part of two years, he went without taking a new one. And I say he didn't take a new one, because he had several job opportunities, but he didn't think any of them were the right fit. More to the point, he lacked any kind of divine clarity about them. He would tell me, "I don't know if this is what God wants me to do." My friend experienced what we sometimes call a paralysis of analysis. He couldn't get his brain around all the ifs, ands, and buts. And it wasn't that he didn't care. In fact, his problem was the exact opposite of that. He thought, and worried, and presumed too much. He was too cautious.

A more infamous example of what happens when we are too cautious, it comes to us from American industry. The Kodak company had an engineer who worked for them named Steve Sasson. And the story goes that Sasson invented the digital camera. But Kodak's leaders at the time were extremely cautious and reluctant. They didn't want to disrupt their firm hold on the film photography market. So, they chose to shelve that new technology. Of course, other companies like Sony and Canon embraced the technology. By the time Kodak decided to pivot and get into the market, it was too little, too late. They had missed out on the digital photography revolution, and most folks agree that that was probably the biggest factor in Kodak filing for bankruptcy in 2012.

I wonder, what if our widow in this morning's Old Testament lesson had proceeded with that kind of caution. We're told that she only had a handful of meal in a jar and a little bit of oil, and she also had a son. When Elijah met her, she was preparing for her final meal with her son. That was it. All she seemingly had within her power to do was put food on the table one more time. She had resigned herself to die. She had nothing.

And then here comes Elijah, at God's command, asking her to share what little bit she did have. Someone once said that you don't know that God is all you need until God is all you have. And maybe that's what opened her heart to hospitality at a time when many of us would have closed ourselves off to the promises of God. And yet she risked everything by trusting in God's provision.

By comparison, we have so much, and yet we do so much less. Our risks are miniscule by comparison. At a dinner party, we may shy away from even talking about the difference that Jesus makes in our

life. What will they say? Will they look at me funny? Will they think I'm weird? In Matthew chapter 16, verses 24-25, we read: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life, will lose it. And those who lose their life for my sake, will find it."

In Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book "The Cost of Discipleship," he argued that a true faith isn't about playing it safe. It requires the cross. It involves a willingness to take risks and take sacrifices. Bonhoeffer wrote, "when Christ calls a man, he bids him to come and die." Oh, at times we may feel like we are bearing the weight of a cross, negotiating the shadows, the valleys of the shadow of death. Though at other times we may feel like we are lifting the cross, celebrating God's goodness and grace.

Nevertheless, in the highs and in the lows, there is always a measure of risk. Consider some of the other people in the Bible. They don't throw caution to the wind, mind you, but they don't let it stop them either. There is, of course, Abraham who we know by faith left his country to go to an unknown land. And on another part of his life's journey, he risked the life of his own son. Or Esther, she risked her life when it came to preserving the Jews. Or Joanna, whose husband worked for Herod Antipas. She loved Jesus and supported him, even in spite of her husband's employment. Another example, we sometimes gloss over the risks of the friends of the paralyzed man who opened a hole in the roof and lowered their friend down.

Well, this morning's New Testament lesson, we often think about it within the context of stewardship, and certainly stewardship is good interpretive framework. But this story is also about the importance of taking risks. And the one slave, he was very much mindful of the risks. He concluded that being risk averse was the right course of action. However, when it's all said and done, he had taken the far greater risk by playing it safe. We are essentially told that in God's economy of grace we either use it or lose it. We don't save it for a rainy day.

The Bible puts it like this: for all those who have more, more will be given and they will have an abundance. But from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. This is much more than a cautionary tale. This is, in fact, the problem with an abundance of caution. When fear leads to inaction, and we squander wasted opportunities, we stifle the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, and we limit our effectiveness to the kingdom of God.

Praise be to God that two of the servants in our parable, they took risks. They were productive, they were industrious. They took what God had given them and they used it to make more. They were and are the salt and light of the world. They are the ones who at work or school or on a softball field or a swimming pool or in a book club or a Koinonia fellowship group, I mean, they are the ones who while their master is away have chosen to honor the gifts that have been given to them by demonstrating the blessings of their life. By bearing fruit for God's glory. I saw two of those servants in action this past week. Ansley Feussner and Catie Smith, they were the co-directors of our Vacation Bible School. And when 120 kids came, and as Mary pointed out and about 20 of them signed up at the last minute and when some of them just decided to show up unannounced, they didn't close registration, they didn't worry excessively about the risks of not having enough snacks, or t-shirts. They and the other volunteers, they figured it out. And I know it had to be exhausting at times, but it was also a blessing.

We all have talents, gifts from God, to be used for the people of God. And while it may sometimes feel that all we have is some meal and a little bit of oil in a jar, that is more than enough when we're talking about God's provision. In other words, we're not talking about our provision or our things, but rather

God's blessings. We don't last. Our stuff, it doesn't last. The hymn puts it like this, "To you who boasts tomorrow's gain, tell me what is your life? A mist that vanishes at dawn, all glory be to Christ." The God of all creation, from whom all blessings flow. The one who gives us grace upon grace. See, he doesn't give us those blessings so that we can preserve them as they are, that we would go over to Sullivan's Island and bury them in the sand. They are given to us so that we can be a blessing. God is not calling us to jump out of airplanes, though the world might be left to think so given how we squander God's everyday banquets of grace. Most of us will never face real fear or genuine risk associated with sharing our faith even though there is less and less forbearance in our culture.

In our culture today, there still exists a deeply entrenched religious liberty. It should make us wonder, I mean, is our risk really that great? Our confessional heritage, it would remind us that in any and all circumstances, that even the church is called to risk and trust. Even at the expense of losing her life. In this way, God's church called forth is not to be about the business of playing it safe. The servant who is given the one talent was called, among other things, lazy. We don't want to be called lazy. We don't think of ourselves as lazy. But when we sit on God's blessings, that's exactly what we're doing. We have been given the blessed responsibility to increase God's gifts. We are called to be about the business of enhancing God's Kingdom, helping for example as many of you did just yesterday with the Hands of Christ ministry. Trusting in God's sovereignty, stepping out in faith. It means that we don't just talk about the needs of others, but we actually address the needs of others. God has given us these promises, not just to talk about them, but to be a part of their fulfillment, part of all those things that work together for good, for those who love the Lord and are called according to his purpose.

John Wesley is attributed for having said this, "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, and all the places you can, to all the people you can for as long as you ever can." The Bible puts it like this: God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline. When we one day come before God and he asks what did we do with our talent, what will we say? Will we say, "I played it safe. Here, God take what is yours?" Or will we say, "I have by your grace managed your resources well and wisely. I have taken what you have given me, and I've invested it in your people and in your glory?" One thing is for sure, if we respond in some way akin to the latter, God will most assuredly say to us, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave. You have been trustworthy of a few things. I will put you in charge of many things. Enter into the joy of your master."

Let us pray...

Almighty and Everlasting God, help us to deny ourselves, our fears, that abundance of caution which sometimes gets in our way of serving you. Fill us instead with courage and joy, that we may always be willing to take the risks that you would have for us to take for your kingdom, knowing that you, oh Lord, are always faithful. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, we pray. Amen.