

THE COMFORTABLE CHURCH

Psalm 123
Matthew 25: 14-30

Faith Community
November 13, 2005

Introduction

A family moves into a new home; one of the first things they do is install deadbolt locks. We don't like to take any risks. As you walk to your car at the mall, there is a van with its alarm blaring. The owner of the van is inside and not aware of the screeching noise that is going on. We protect ourselves against risk.

A poor man comes to a church to ask for food. They tell him they don't have any and send him away. At its next meeting, the board votes to keep the church doors locked during the day.

A group of people is chatting while waiting in line at the grocery store. People across the check out and people behind in line all join in the conversation. An Arab man stands in the midst of all this. No one speaks to him.

A couple discusses what they could give as they prepare to fill out their pledge card. They come up with a number, but then think of the things they would like to get in the next year. "With all of that, we'd better cut back, just in case," he says. They fill in an amount that is about half of what they originally considered.

Other than Evil Knevil, who made a ton of money at it, we don't like to take risks.

I

Jesus tells a parable about taking risks and playing it safe. A man is going on a journey and before he leaves, he entrusts his money with three of his employees. To one he gives \$5000. To another he gives \$2000. To a third he gives \$1000.

The first person invests the \$5000 and makes \$5000 more. The second person invests the \$2000 and makes \$2000 more. The last person takes the \$1000 and buries it in the ground. That was the ordinary way to keep something secure in Jesus' time. It would be the modern equivalent of taking the money to the safe deposit box.

Now, other than knowing you shouldn't, don't you have real sympathy for that last servant? Haven't you been there yourself?

The pressure at work is getting intense. You know some people are going to have to go. You come to work and there are empty boxes in the hallway. That means someone will be leaving today; you wonder if it will be you.

In that environment, you don't want to go out on a limb. Don't take chances. Be safe. You have a ton of bills every month. You can't afford to make a mistake.

We know about being safe.

II

But two of the people in this parable took risks – big risks. They took the money entrusted to them and traded with it. They could have lost everything and had to stand before their boss with nothing. Then what would he have said?

This story reminds me of another parable of Jesus. A Samaritan was traveling down a road, and he saw a man who was beaten, robbed and lying by the side of the road. It turns out the wounded man was a Jew, an enemy of Samaritans.

The Samaritan reaches down and helps the man, binding his wounds and pouring ointment on them. Then he takes the man to an inn and cares for him. The next morning he leaves money with the innkeeper and tells him to give the man whatever he needs, and if he needs to spend more, the Samaritan will reimburse him for it.

Here is a person who faced real risk. The wounded man could be a decoy, so that when someone comes to help him the robbers jump out and attack. Even in stopping to help, the Samaritan risks being attacked himself. Obviously, this is a very dangerous place.

The Samaritan faced a huge risk, but he looked beyond that, or maybe he didn't. Maybe he didn't think about it at all. Maybe, he just saw a person in serious need and acted automatically.

He gave what was needed, not what he could afford. He put himself at great risk because of love, even love for his enemy! Remember in the story there were two others who came before him – a priest and a Levite. They played it safe.

III

There was an article in the paper a few weeks ago titled, "Why I lost faith in my church." It is by a journalist who is also a licensed minister. He addresses African-American churches, but what he says applies to all of us.

He has left the church, but not his faith, he says, because its "preoccupation with the material world is pervasive." He decries the celebrity preacher in a Mercedes Benz who preaches a gospel of comfort in a multi-million dollar edifice equipped with every new gadget.

Where is the church that reaches out, as Jesus did, to the helpless, the poor, the sick and the rejected? Where is the church that cares more about the people in its community than the number of people packing its pews? He calls this development the "implosion of the church." It is the self-centeredness of the church. A church turned on itself where people are only interested in their relationship with Jesus, their bible study, their own spiritual growth.

This is an aberrant Christianity that thinks it can survive with Me and Jesus. It is not the church of Jesus Christ, who said, "Love God with your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself."

Without risking that love of the other, even the very unpleasant other, we are not living our faith. A safe, warm, comfortable Christianity is not the faith of Jesus Christ, who died on the cross to save you and me.

Conclusion

Do you know what comes right after this passage in Matthew? The very next words Jesus speaks are those of the scripture we read last week – Jesus account of the judgment, where he says whenever you have provided food, water, clothing or care to one of the least of our brothers and sisters, you have done that for Christ himself.

To feed hungry people and provide clothing to the homeless or to visit those who are sick or in prison cannot be done without taking risks. To do these things pulls us out of our comfort zone. But the alternative is much worse. Jesus says that those who don't care for those in need face God's judgment.

Is your faith too easy?

Amen