

## **Sermon: Taking a Chance**

**The Revd Corbet Clark, St Aidan's Episcopal Church, 11/19/23**

**Matthew 25:14-29**

As is often the case, the parable we just heard has an outcome that to Jesus' listeners, was probably unexpected.

Consider the story: A wealthy man goes away, leaving three slaves with varying amounts of money to take care of. The men are called slaves but probably were trusted assistants to the wealthy men, because the amounts of money were very high, a single talent being the equivalent of many years' wages for an ordinary worker.

The first two slaves take the money and invest it or trade with it, and each manages to double his money, which suggests that they were probably taking some financial risks. The third slave decides to play it safe. He knows the owner will hold him strictly accountable for the money. It's risky to invest it, and it's even risky to give it to bankers, who, as we well know, sometimes lose money. So he does the safest thing he can think of, to bury it in the ground.

Remember that Jesus' listeners are landless peasants with little money, and with what money may come their way, they're not going to risk in business or entrust to others. So they're probably nodding their heads, thinking, the third man did the right thing.

But no, instead the owner, when he returns, praises the slaves who took risks with his money and condemns and punishes the slave who played it entirely safe.

So what's going on here? This is not intended to be a financial allegory. Jesus is not giving advice about money management. Instead, what Jesus is commending is taking action, taking risks to accomplish something for God's work instead of playing it safe.

He's trying to convince listeners that God's kingdom has come near, that there is an urgent need for people to take action in response. But in a traditional society people don't take chances, they play it safe, they do what is customary.

Jesus has to overcome human nature. Social psychologists tell us that humans fear loss more than they desire gain. So if you have \$100, and I offer you the chance of a coin flip to double your money – or lose it all – most people will hang onto their money. And even if you think, "Well, I could risk \$100." What if the amount were \$10,000, or your life savings – would you really risk it all in order to double your money? Probably not.

But God wants people to take action, even involving risk, in order to advance God's kingdom. Jesus has to convince listeners to take a chance on him, when to his audience he probably seems far from a sure bet.

We have all faced having to make big choices in our lives, decisions that involve uncertainty and the risk of potential loss. Maybe it's whether to take a new job, start a new career, buy a new house, move somewhere completely new, start a new relationship.

In my life, I have several times felt called to new work, leaving something safe to try something different. After working as a parish priest for some years, I felt called to try

school ministry. I wasn't sure I could do it – I didn't have any experience. That first job was only temporary and involved a cut in pay. I decided to go for it. That job didn't last, but it led to other opportunities, and I ended spending 35 years in school ministry, as chaplain and teacher. It wouldn't have happened if I hadn't taken a chance.

Those of us in Christian communities often face big choices, both as individuals and as congregations. Those choices often boil down to either doing what we've been doing and hoping for the best, or taking a risk to do something different that holds great promise to advance the work of God's kingdom. Maybe it's taking on a new position of responsibility in church, or working in a new outreach ministry, or, as a congregation, starting a new project that holds great promise but might not work out.

There are always good reasons not to act, to take an idea or project or proposal and bury it in the dirt. We don't have the time or the money, we're not sure we have the skills or experience to do what's needed. We see the possibility, but we're afraid we might fail.

Jesus is telling us: the time is now, the need is great, take action.

I will guess that those men by the Sea of Galilee whom Jesus called to action must have thought that Jesus' project of a new community to prepare for God's kingdom was definitely a long shot, that they had no idea how to make that happen. But something deep inside them called them to take the risk. To go for it. And they did.