

Sermon for November 16, 2014 (Proper 28, Year A)
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary

Texts: 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30

Title: Free people take risks

Right as the war with Japan and the Axis nations was concluding in 1945, the Rev. John McGee and his wife Doris, along with their 2 year old son, left their home bound for the deep tropical forests of Nigeria. In total, their trip would take nearly three months with most of that time spent aboard a ship from New York to London, and then on to Egypt.

Doesn't that sound like fun? Two months aboard a ship with a 2 year old boy?

Pastor McGee and his wife were both from poor families in North Carolina. In fact, he had dropped out of school when he was 13 in order to help his share-cropping father with the tobacco harvest.

Some of you might know that this pastor and his wife, John and Doris McGee, are the grandparents of my wife, Erin. They went on to spend their entire career in rural Nigeria, giving birth to their second child, and raising both of their boys, in a place with barely any electricity, no paved roads, and little access to professional medical care.

What is it that gives certain people the interior strength and courage to take such enormous risks with their lives?

And how is it that some people are about to step out courageously in this kind of way while others remain on a path of safety and certainty?

Today we are continuing on our steady journey through the end of Matthew's Gospel, chugging along through the 25th chapter step by step.

NEXT WEEK we get to the good stuff, the great story (in my humble opinion!). But TODAY we have to deal with what is traditionally called "the Parable of the Talents".

So that we're clear: no, these are not talents in the same sense that we use this word in English.

In Roman times, **talanta** was a certain weight of metal coins. No one knows for sure how much the weight was – as there were different measurements in different regions, but each talanta was certainly worth a large amount.

Most scholars place the amount of each talanta to be nearly \$500,000 in today's values. That's a fairly hefty amount.

Now let's look at the parable itself. I've spent all week reading it and meditating on it.

Can I be honest with all of you, for a minute? Can I just say that I REALLY don't like this parable? Is that OK?

Am I allowed to say that without disappointing too many of you – or perhaps even God?

To be honest, I reject that view of God which puts God in the position of the master in this parable.

A master who harshly punishes the reluctant and fearful servant.

This person is not wicked and lazy, just anxious and fearful.

How unusual is that? It's not at all, is it? It's quite common.

I resist that depiction of God as the one who takes away from the fearful and anxious ones the very few items of comfort and security to which they cling.

I struggle with that portrait of God as the one who rewards the winners and punishes the losers.

I wrestled all week with this parable, and what the Holy Spirit has said to me after meditating and praying and reading is this:

Our experience is shaped by our expectations.

Consider for a moment the two different approaches taken by these servants.

The first two servants – the ones who receive the 5 talents and the 2 talents – both determined to take these resources out into the community and to be productive with them.

In short, these two took risks. The marketplace is always risky. Failure and loss are always possible. You can never know for sure when others are out to deceive you, to take advantage of you.

But these two servants obviously felt free to take risks with the talents of money – smart risks, wise risks that were intended to create and reproduce.

And this is precisely what they experienced. Their labors produced results and they found their master to be thrilled with what they had done.

And so these two celebrated with the master. Their experience was consistent with their expectations, with their approach toward the world.

Now if the parable ended here, we would all think of the master as a pretty good guy, right! He entrusted these two with responsibility. They handled this in a wise fashion, and he honored them appropriately for their sound stewardship.

End the story right here, and all is well! But of course, it doesn't end on a happy note.

The third servant determined to take his treasure and to hide it away out of fear.

This was not so unusual. It was rather common in those days to bury treasure in the ground. When conquering armies came through raping and pillaging, as they did periodically in that part of the world, this was the only sure way to safeguard valuables.

This servant decided that it was just too risky to carry this treasure out into the world. He looked at the world through the eyes of fear.

And this is precisely what he experienced. He was afraid of the wrath of the master. So he buried the talent. What he experienced then was the wrath of the master.

Two different ways of seeing. Two different set of expectations.
Two VERY different experiences.

My friends, you do not want the experience that is framed by anxiety and fear.

I want you to be free. And I am confident of this: God wants you to be free.

Free from compulsions, free from fear.

Free from the anxiety-driven need to burry your treasure, to hide from the dangerous possibilities of life out in the world.

Because free people take risks.

Not stupid risks – like riding in a car without wearing a seatbelt.

Not anything like that, but free people take risks like taking their treasure out into the marketplace and seeing what good might be done with it – seeing how it might multiply and grow.

Free people take the risk of traveling across the ocean to live in a remote foreign land, simply because God called them to do so.

Free people take the risk of opening their homes to foster-children who are in need of care and protection, only because of compassion.

Free people take the risk of going to West Africa to work with victims of Ebola, sharing their skills with those who need them most, simply because the need is so great.

Free people take the risk of generously giving away their income.

Some of you may know the risk-taking story of John Wesley.
John Wesley was the founder of the Methodist movement within the Church of England. On THIS side of the Atlantic, that movement grew into the Methodist churches which were extremely active and prolific along the American frontier.

Do you know the John Wesley never increased his salary throughout his long career?

Even though his movement blossomed and grew exponentially throughout his life, he determined that he could live on the same amount each year of his life.

When he made this decision at the age of 27, he had an income of 30 pounds per year. He used 28 for his expenses - which is about what was required at that time for a single man to live an ordinary life - and he gave the other two pounds away.

Before long, he was earning 60 pounds per year.

He continued to spend 28 of those on his expenses and gave away 32 pounds each year.

This continued throughout his life. By the end, he was earning over 1400 pounds per year. Of course, there was some minimal inflation, so by this time he spent 30 pounds on his living expenses and gave the rest away.

Can you do that quick math? This means that at the end of his life, John Wesley was giving away 97.85% of his annual income!

Absolutely astounding. Not very surprising then that Wesley became famous for this saying: "What should rise is **not** the Christian's standard of living, but the Christian's standard of giving."

My friends: free people take the risk of radical generosity, because they know that their security and happiness is never found in money or material possessions.

God created you to be free. God created you to be a risk-taker.

Not stupid risks, but risks of service, compassion and generosity.

And this is what I know to be true: when you take THOSE kinds of risks on the basis of trust in the never-failing care of God, you WILL experience celebration and joy and fruitfulness unlike anything you have ever imagined.

So what do you want to experience? Which kind of servant will you be? Can you trust God enough to be a risk-taker in your real, everyday life?

May it be so. Amen.