

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
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The Risk of Faith

Luke 19:11-27

Earlier this week, I received an email from our church's insurance company. Its headline read: "Learn what you can do to reduce your risk." Not a surprising summary for an insurance update. After all, that's what insurance companies do. They help their clients manage their risks. In this case, the risk had to do with the coronavirus that's been spreading to more and more countries, including the United States.

Near the bottom of the email was a bright red button labeled "View Risk Alert" which took me to a page summarizing the essentials about the coronavirus outbreak and outlining action steps that we can take to help reduce its spread. Familiar recommendations were there, like avoiding contact with sick people, washing your hands, and curtailing travel, not to mention having an emergency preparedness plan for the congregation. Along the same lines, I even got an email from another Christian organization noting the growing discussion about the ways that churches practice communion, especially drinking from a shared cup or breaking bread from a single loaf.

If you're looking for a completely risk-free environment, the church can't guarantee it. In fact, as my inbox indicates, we communities of Christ-followers have our own unique risk exposures. But at the same time, we disciples are no strangers to the language of risk. Not in the sense of exposing ourselves to viruses but in the sense of exercising faith, which by its very nature involves risk. I don't mean faith that rejects common sense or ignores appropriate precautions. I mean faith that refuses to play it safe in the service of God and his kingdom. The kind of faith being called for in today's text from Luke.

If you're thinking that this story sounds familiar, you may be thinking of the parable of the talents in Matthew. That's a different story. The one here in Luke is related to it, and bears some resemblance to it, but also has its own distinctive features. In Matthew, a master who's going on a journey entrusts his servants with enormous amounts of money, with the intention that they use them to increase the master's property while he's away. In Luke, a nobleman goes away to receive the title and crown of king. He too entrusts his servants with significant sums of money, and expects them to use it profitably. And yet there are some citizens who hate him and send a delegation to oppose his coronation. When he returns, he rewards those who have served him well and slaughters his enemies.

To the original hearers of this story, this scenario may have been no imaginative, hypothetical situation. At various times, rulers in Judea, particularly Herod and his sons, had traveled to Rome seeking the title "king." Once in power, they often carried out their agenda with ruthlessness and brutality, including reprisal against those who opposed them. So it's very possible that many of those who first heard Jesus' parable, or Luke's recounting of it, were already very familiar with vengeful, violent, and greedy kings.

But Jesus himself is not that kind of king. He is a king. Indeed, the king who brings in the reign of God. Remember that this parable comes right before Jesus' triumphal entry to

Jerusalem. He's on his way to the holy city where he'll be hailed as king, "the king who comes in the name of the Lord" (19:38). And yet, the shape of his life and ministry, and the events that will unfold in Jerusalem, reveal that Jesus' kingship is unlike the kind of kingship the people have experienced. For the most part, they've lived under the authority of rulers who were corrupt, greedy, and violent. But life in the kingdom of God, under the rule of Jesus, is different. The value system in Jesus' kingdom goes against the world of power plays, prosperity, dominance, and vengeance against enemies on display in the parable.

Like the first readers of Luke, we contemporary disciples still wait for the full revelation of God's reign in Christ. The kingdom that arrived through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection will be disclosed and established when the world's true ruler returns. In the interim, we're called to be trustworthy and faithful. We're to be risk-takers for the sake of God's kingdom. Like the servants in the parable, we're accountable for how we put our lives and God's gifts to use in the work of the gospel. That requires faith, and faith requires risk.

Pastor and author Eugene Peterson once noted:

What is hazardous in my life is my work as a Christian. Every day I put faith on the line. I have never seen God. In a world where nearly everything can be weighed, explained, quantified, subjected to psychological analysis and scientific control I persist in making the center of my life a God whom no eye hath seen, nor ear heard, whose will no one can probe. That's a risk.¹

That's the foundational risk of the Christian life, trust in an unseen God whose loving sovereignty operates in the world and in our lives in ways that are often contrary to the value systems of present kingdoms.

Our commission is to trustingly proclaim and practice the way of God and the will of God revealed to us in Jesus. This means that our trust is a response to the trustworthiness of God. Our faith is a response to the faithfulness of God. Our risk-taking is a response to God's risk-taking. After all, no one is more of a risk-taker than God. Think of the risk God takes in creating the world, in making each of us and giving us freedom and choice, including the freedom to resist and reject God, to refuse the reality of his reign and be excluded from his dominion forever. Think of the risk God takes in forming his church out of flawed and sinful human beings who often fail to embody the way of Jesus. Think of the risk God takes in entrusting the gospel to self-protective beings like us who would rather save ourselves than risk ourselves for the purposes of the cross.

And yet, today's parable comes from the mouth of the one who was on his way to suffering and crucifixion, losing his life for us, so that we may know and live in the reign of God. "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me," he says. Denying self and taking up your cross daily involves risk-taking. Not risk for the sake of showing that you're capable of being daring and radical, willing to live on the edge. Not risk for the sake of proving something to yourself and to others. Not risk for the sake of impressing God. Rather, risk that's grounded in the goodness and trustworthiness of God. Risk that's rooted in faith, not fear.

Recall that there's a lot to fear about the king in today's parable. His hunger for power. His pursuit of wealth. His ruthless exercise of authority. His vengeance toward those who oppose him. But again, the parable wants to underscore the difference between his kingship and God's kingship. Being a risk-taker for God's reign isn't driven by fear of the one who rules. It's motivated by faith in him, knowing the lengths to which he has gone to redeem us.

The most risk-averse character in today's story is the third servant who, out of fear of the king, took what was entrusted to him and placed it in a piece of cloth for safekeeping. Knowing the king's behavior, the servant probably figured that he wouldn't get any return for his work. The king would probably just take all the earnings anyway. So the servant played it safe, preserved the gift, and returned it without profit. No risk, no reward.

The rewards actually go to those who took what was entrusted to them, and let it go. They risked by doing business with what was given to them. No matter whether the source of the gifts is a bad king or a good king, this part of the story holds true. Fearfulness, caution, and inactivity won't get the job done. There has to be some stepping out in faith, some confidence that the cause of the kingdom is worth the risk.

Pastor and author J. R. Briggs tells about how his father taught him and his brother how to ski, and how much he learned to love it. Briggs says:

I remember the first time Alan and I skied for most of the day by ourselves. At the end of the day we clicked off our skis, and dad asked us a peculiar question: "Did you fall today?"

"What?"

The question sounded pessimistic. That's not the normal first question you ask someone coming off a day on the slopes. Dad said it again: "Did you fall today?"

"No, I don't think I did," I responded somewhat proudly.

"Then you didn't try something new today, did you?"

His response startled me. *What do you mean? I stayed up the entire day without falling!* Dad went on to explain that if we didn't fall then we probably weren't in a position to try something new, something daring, something that scared you a little bit—something that involved risk on the mountain. And thus, we probably didn't have an opportunity to become a better skier.²

Waiting for the coming of the king doesn't mean playing it safe and settling for the status quo. It means becoming a better disciple. And becoming a better disciple means knowing when and how to take risks for the sake of God's kingdom. I'm not talking about being reckless and irresponsible. I'm talking about carefully and prayerfully considered risk. I like the way that Luci Shaw puts it: "Risk and trust must hold hands. Risk without trust is foolhardiness. Trust without the willingness to risk is shallowness and self-protection."³

Rather than devoting yourself to self-protection and self-preservation, be open to where and how God may be calling you to risk yourself for the sake of his reign in the world. It could be risk in a relationship you have or one you need to form. It could be risk with financial or material resources entrusted to you. It could be risk in some kind of cause or project that you need to take up. It could be risk in some kind of societal issue or injustice that you need to address. It could be risk with some kind of divide or barrier that you need to cross for the sake of the gospel. Remember that Jesus' way of being king exposed him to risk, so we should expect the same for ourselves as we do our part in the work of his kingdom.

¹Quoted in *Christianity Today*, Vol. 4, No. 11.

² Preaching Today website. Accessed March 5, 2020 <<https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2011/february/4022111.html>>.

³ Luci Shaw, "The Crime of Living Cautiously." A lecture given at Regent College, Vancouver, BC.