

Living larger

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Vicar,
at the eleven o'clock service November 13, 2011: The Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost.*

Based on Matthew 25:14-30.

Risk taking is easier for some of us than for others. Honestly, it has never been my first inclination. Even as a kid, I always considered other options first, knowing somehow that I could die. Can't you just imagine how popular I was? "I don't think we should do that; we might die." These are not now and never were hip words. And I have not grown out of it, certainly not in physical events. The only advanced or black slope I ever skied down occurred mostly by accident, a wrong turn that once engaged could only be ridden with great shrieking to its dramatic conclusion. Let me assure you that the fact that I survived did not suddenly convert me into a risk taking cowboy skier. In fact, I never skied another advanced slope, choosing to remain happily an intermediate skier for the rest of my life without an ounce of shame.

And, yet, somewhere along the way I have reluctantly but emphatically learned that in the whole of life, certainly regarding things and people that really matter, while it is not always easy to take a risk, it is utterly necessary—necessary if we are interested in truly living. Just hanging on for dear life while hoarding what we have, though often appearing to be quite reasonable, is—if we are to take seriously this cheerful gospel lesson—a sure path to outer darkness where gnashing of teeth is all the rage.

Though that's the long and short of this passage, tough and to the point, a passage I believe to be as true as anything in the Bible, there are a couple of points of context that help us understand it without mitigating its dire message, which as you will see I happen to believe is spot on. This is the third parable in a series of stories toward the close of Matthew that point to what life should be like as the *eschaton* nears, as the end of time approaches. Remember that all of the gospel narrators believed, as did Paul and other writers of the New Testament, that the end of the world was about to come. Sometimes when I hear some new lunatic predicting that the end is coming or I see someone holding a sign in Times Square announcing it, I think about these treasured giants of our tradition, the gospel narrators, Paul, realizing that in their own time they were doomsdayers and wonder if people thought they were nuts too. I suppose they did.

A second matter of context involves the use of the word talent, which complicates the story for us. It is essentially a transliteration of the Greek work *talanta*, which has nothing to do with our sense of the word "talent" as one's natural ability, but refers instead to a large amount of money. Jesus used a grand hyperbole, as was his custom and the rhetorical custom of the time. These were not small prizes. Each talent was worth 6000 *denarii*, which means that the smallest amount, the one talent received by the third servant, was the equivalent of twenty years of minimum wage! You can do the math for Servant One and Servant Two; the sums in the story were enormous, life-changing amounts of money. Jesus, whose humanness we often trivialize by attempting to present him as so otherworldly (as in "he wouldn't touch filthy lucre") used the very real medium of money to make a spiritual point about the coming of the Kingdom of God. He did so because then, just as now, money translated, money spoke. To this day a story about money—particularly a story about how we might get a huge pot of it, is a sure way to get our attention.

But talking about money only goes as far as talking about money can go, and Jesus certainly knew that too. This is a story about life that simply uses money as a prop. Part of its poignancy, though, is that it mirrors how out of whack life becomes if we substitute money for life. The third guy, a poor fellow quite understandable to us, was so afraid that he'd lose the money that he forgot to live. He didn't even blow it on a good time; he just hid it, a fact about him that teaches us more about ourselves than we may want to know.

We are wired with the desire for safety, even those of you are notorious risk takers. Every hierarchy of needs ever envisioned contains at or near the core level acknowledgment of this need to know that we are generally safe. But the point of this gospel story—indeed the point of Jesus' life—is that even as important as safety is, it is not that for which we live our lives. The first two servants took risks. The story doesn't tell how much risk, how much of their portfolio

was in bonds and how much was in stocks, how speculative they were or were not. But even if they had lost every penny, the spirit of the story (and it is a story, not a real life event) is that they would have been rewarded anyway, for they were willing to risk life in order to have it.

The tragedy in the story is not the lack of return made by the third servant on his money; the real tragedy is the fear and hesitancy and paralysis with which he lived his life. In the end that fear, sad but true, separated him from God. The language is rough (and metaphorical) but absolutely true: it is death to live life so cautiously, so fearfully that we miss it. In a strange way, the people predicting the end, people whom I almost always dismiss, and sometimes unkindly ridicule, may not be all-wrong. In fact, I don't think they are—except in the particulars. The end of our world will come; you can bank on it. No one knows when, but it will come. I don't believe that the world is headed for the eschaton; I guess it could be, but I don't really believe that. And beyond what I believe or don't believe, which is only interesting to me, it seems to me that focusing on some cataclysmic end to the world is actually a distraction. But admitting that our time is limited is to acknowledge a big life truth. The only thing I know is that the days, weeks, years we sometimes waste by living in fear and paralyzing caution can never be lived again. That time is lost, lost forever. And Jesus was right: living in such fear is its own kind of outer darkness. Call it judgment if you want to, or just call it life.

It is the third servant from whom I think we can learn the most. He represents a part of us that is so suspicious of life and its possibilities that we would just as soon take whatever comes with as little effort as possible and ride it through to the end. That is the teaching Jesus, I believe, wants us to hear. Do we take what we are given and use it to enlarge our world, to expand it in faith beyond what it was at the beginning, or do we hide it, hide ourselves away, hanging on to stay the same, rather than risking to become what it is that God has for us to be? How much are we willing to risk to be who we truly are? That is the question.

The third servant's fear of what he imagined could happen to him stopped him dead in his tracks. It pains me to think of all the moments I have lost to fear—moments when I did not say what I wanted to say for fear that I would be ignored or ridiculed, moments when I wanted to say “I love you” but fear of rejection kept me quiet, moments when I wanted to be honest with someone deserving of my honesty when fear of something—confrontation perhaps, unpleasantness—silenced me, diminishing both of us. A moment of truth and potential goodness lost forever. Of course, it could be reclaimed another time, but that moment is gone.

Could it be that this gospel is calling into question the fact that we so often just play it safe, that our thinking generally is so sadly small? Sometimes when we consider new programs or new solutions, we remind ourselves of the truth that “Rome wasn't built in a day.” I am weary of that aphorism. Shouldn't we build as much of it in a day as we can, building like there is no tomorrow? Isn't it possible that our being so reasonable actually limits God? I don't know what the Occupiers are doing downtown, but they are doing something; and in the process they have pushed me just a bit beyond my comfort zone. I can pick at their techniques and criticize their lack of focus, but one reason the story doesn't seem to go away is that they are risking something for what they believe. And I am unwilling to ever call that bad.

Such actions remind me that St. Bart's can be more than it is—wonderful though it is. We have the people and the resources to make the world, at least our corner of it, a not insignificant corner, better. Just look around at this place: we have hit the jackpot! Like the man with five talents, we have the goods to do amazing things in this space and in the space below it, where we house the shelter, the feeding program, the pantry—what an amazing difference we have made and can continue to make in the lives of so many people. And we do it by living and risking and loving with abandon and joy, not with tightfisted fear but with generous hearts and minds, blown open with the compulsion to share the resources we have.

Here's to believing and thinking and hoping big—really big—in our lives and in our faith! We are given it and it is ours to live!

In the name of God: *Amen.*

©2011 St. Bartholomew's Church in The City of New York.

*For information about St. Bartholomew's and its life of faith and mission at an important American crossroads, write us at central@stbarts.org, call 212/378-0222, or visit stbarts.org.
325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022.*