

“Daring to Love and Hope”

Sermon Preached by Rev. Young-Mee Park

At First United Methodist Church of Oak Park

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Texts: Judges 4:1-7, 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11, Matthew 25:14-30

Going off on an extended trip, a man called his servants together and entrusted his property to them. To one he gave a million dollars, to another a half million, to a third a hundred thousand. Right off, the first servant went to work and doubled his master's investment, and so did the second. But, as for the third, he dug a hole and carefully buried his master's money.

After a long absence, the master of those three servants came back and settled accounts with them. The one given a million dollars showed him how he had doubled his investment. His master commended him: *'Good work! You did your job well. From now on, be my partner.'* The second servant came, and the master commended him with the same words.

When the third servant came and showed his master how carefully he had hid and secured his money, the master was furious, *“You wicked and lazy slave! That's a terrible way to live! Oust!”*

To whom do you relate the most in the story? How much is your retirement fund earning right now? As for me, I wish I had put my extra cash under the mattress, rather than investing it in my retirement fund. Today's story sounds a bit shocking, isn't it? It sounds like an investment seminar, when I would rather join the occupiers' camp on the Wall Street.

Some scholars argue that the hero in the story is not the two first servants who doubled their master's investment, but the third who buried his master's money. In those days, the only way to double funds was to make outrageously high interest loans to peasant farmers who were already strapped beyond endurance by both Temple and Roman taxes. Therefore, the third servant who buried his master's money is not a coward, but a courageous whistleblower. He is the hero. He refused to participate in an oppressive system.

A quite interesting interpretation, isn't it? Yet, it leaves so many questions unanswered. Who, then, is the master? Why did Jesus tell this story? How does the story relate to other stories told in the same context, in the same teaching session? You know, it was during the last few days of Jesus' life here on earth. He told this story as part of the response to the disciples' question about the end of the time. *“Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?”* Thus was the disciples' question. I do not think that the point of the story is just about money or wealth or our economic system. Rather, this is a story about our life here on earth in its entirety, in its wholeness, as we wait for that day when Christ, our Master, will return in the full glory of his promised reign. This is a story about how we are to live our lives as fully as possible, as freely as possible, by investing them, by risking, by expanding the horizons of our responsibilities.

In verse 25, the third servant replied, *“So I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.”* I think this is why the master was furious, that

the servant was afraid, so much so that he did not even try to do anything. He was immobilized by fear. No, I don't think that it was because he did not double his money. I do not think that the result would have even mattered. The master was furious because, in his fear, the third servant buried in the ground, not just his master's money, but his life.

You see? Faith is a high-risk venture. The major themes of the Christian faith – caring, sharing, trusting, loving, hoping, rejoicing – cannot be understood or lived without risk. To trust is to risk betrayal. To hope is to risk despair. To try is to risk failure. To love is to risk making ourselves vulnerable. To reach out for another is to risk rejection on the one hand and involvement on the other. To laugh and rejoice is to risk appearing foolish. And to be alive and faithful is to risk all of the above. Yet, we are mandated to care and share and trust and love and hope and be alive and faithful, together, as a community of faith.

I am deeply moved to know that as Jesus is telling this story, he, himself, is in the middle of his own personal high-risk venture. Remember? It was during the last few days of his life. He was in Jerusalem, on his way to the cross. He was faced with all different kinds of risks -- the risk of mockery, the risk of rejection, the risk of appearing foolish, the risk of being a total failure, the risk of death, even death on a cross. We know that taking all these risks, Jesus invested his life for us, totally, completely, and passionately, to the last drop of his sweat and blood.

Yes, my friends, Jesus invested his life for us. This Jesus is the treasure we are given – an enormous, uncountable, unimaginable treasure! The only way to keep this treasure is to share it, give it away, boldly and confidently, without fear, not because we have to, not because our membership will decline and the church budget sag if we don't, but because Jesus is the light and hope of the world! Jesus' warning is that the outcome of playing it safe – not caring, not sharing, not loving passionately, not investing ourselves, not risking anything – is something akin to death, like being banished to the outer darkness.

Our Old Testament lesson today is an opening section of an amazing story about a woman named Deborah, a prophetess and judge in Ancient Israel. Our lesson tells us how she settled disputes among the Israelites and lead the way out of the oppression. Given the patriarchal nature of the world in which she lived, I find the story quite remarkable. We do not get to read from the Book of Judges very often. So I am glad that we are reading this lesson today. As a female preacher myself, the first ever in this congregation's history by the way, I want to shout out loud, "You go, girl, Deborah!"

Yet, we are missing the point, if our attention is all about Deborah and her gender. It is worth noting, worth remembering, and worth celebrating. But, ultimately, it is God who is at work. The God who uses Moses uses Deborah also. The God who uses Deborah uses you and me also. Yes, my friends, today, God calls us to rise up to the challenges of our time. God calls us to dare to care and share. God calls us to dare to love and hope, deeply and passionately, embracing all the risks it involves. God call us to grow and increase the reign of Christ within and among us.

"You are all children of light," says Paul in our Epistle lesson today. We are a people entrusted with the light of the world, my friends. We can be bold. We can be courageous. We can love and hope, deeply and passionately. Thanks be to God!