

"Safety First?"

Matthew 25: 14-30

November 19, 2017

Well, I just want to begin by saying how very glad I am that you all made it here **safely** this morning! You may not realize it, but you took some real risks getting here.

According to government statistics (which we know provide highly reliable and, as you will see, absolutely essential information), you had a one-in-two-million chance of dying by falling out of bed this morning-don't scoff; apparently it happens!

And there was one chance in 350,000 of being electrocuted by your alarm clock. True; government statistics!

While brushing your teeth, you flirted with a 20% chance-we're talking 1 in 5 here, folks-that your tap water has infectious bacteria in it.

Happily, you avoided the one chance in 2,600 that, while getting dressed, you might be zippered, snapped or buttoned into some kind of serious injury.

Now, most people may think that the odds make any of these things highly unlikely, yet they buy a Powerball lottery ticket where the odds are *one in 292 million!*

With the obvious exception of people who do really crazy things like jump off bridges on bungee cords, or parachute out of perfectly good airplanes, most of us are very preoccupied with safety, particularly if we have children.

If there were government statistics on such things (and undoubtedly there are somewhere), I suspect they would tell us that *a very large portion of our income goes to insuring our safety.*

Just think about it: smoke detectors, burglar alarms, large dogs, vitamin supplements, CO2 detectors, car seats for the kids, exercise equipment, pills of all kinds, side impact airbags. And, of course, insurances of all types: life insurance, property insurance, health insurance, car insurance, just to name a few.

We have government agencies which do nothing else but look out for our safety. They crash cars into walls and set things on fire and warn us when products don't meet safety standards. That's all good.

And, seriously now, there are police officers, firefighters, rescue squads, emergency rooms, OSHA inspectors, TSA officers at the airport, hundreds of thousands of people

employed all across the country to make life safer for us at home, at work, on the road and in the air!

Oh, and how about that new car safety feature that automatically applies the breaks on your car to keep you from running over people; you can't say that's not a good idea particularly if you walk a lot and the odds are one in ten that you do!

"Safety first!" That's a motto with which we can all resonate. So, yes, let us use every resource at our disposal to reduce accidents and fatalities. "*Safety first in all things!*"

Well, maybe not in *all* things. I am here to tell you that, when it comes to ***the faith***, "*Safety first*" can steer us in the wrong direction!

"*Safety first!*" was the objective of the third servant in this morning's Gospel lesson. That is why he *buried* the money that the Master placed into his care. He wanted to keep it *safe*. Actually, he wanted to keep *himself* safe! Burying the money seemed to him a prudent course of action because he understood that the Master was a "hard man" and would not be forgiving if he were to return and find the servant had *lost* what he had been given to protect.

What the servant did ***not understand*** was that the talent he had been given was not given to him to be kept safe; *it was given to him to be invested*. But investment involves *risk*, doesn't it, and the servant was too afraid for his own safety and for the safety of the money entrusted to him to take the risk. The safest course of action, he decided, was to bury his talent.

Now, one of the reasons he chose to bury it (as opposed to hiding it someplace else) was that it was a long-standing rabbinic teaching among the Jews that, anyone who buries money which has been put into his care, *is no longer liable for its safety*. By burying the talent, he thought he had washed his hands of any responsibility! Even if someone were to dig it up and steal it! Not his problem!

Apparently, the Master did not hold to "long-standing rabbinic teachings!" When he returned, he generously rewarded the other servants who had *invested* their talents and made a profit. But when it came to the servant who had shunned the responsibility he had been given, who had played it *safe*, the Master took the talent away from him, called him wicked and worthless, and kicked him out!

The point of the parable? **"Safety first!" isn't always the best course of action!** Why? Because the challenge of the parable and the challenge of the Gospel and the challenge of the faith is to *risk* entrusting our lives to a power beyond our own!

In fact, **risk is what often leads us to faith!** And, sometimes, that is a problem for safety conscious people like you and me! To let go and let God be in control is for so many of us simply *too great a risk!* We would rather trust ourselves. We delude ourselves into believing we can handle it. We believe and trust in ourselves, not God! We imagine that, if we adopt a "Safety first!" lifestyle, we can actually be safe!

But the truth is that, finally, whether it's in the midst of personal crisis, or at the point of death, there is no choice but to trust God because we cannot handle it ourselves! That's why *we have got to learn to take the risk to believe!*

Soren Kierkegaard called this risk-taking "*the leap of faith.*" Imagine you are standing at the edge of a wide chasm so deep that the bottom fades into darkness. It makes your heart beat a-mile-a-minute and your stomach churn just to look over the edge. You toss a stone into the darkness and never hear it hit! And, as you stand terrified at the edge, you hear God urge you to trust him and to take the risk of stepping off into the void. That's the "leap of faith!"

You and I will *almost certainly* confront that "leap." *It may come* as the result of the death of a loved one. It may come as we ourselves confront death when the doctors are no longer able to keep us *safe* from the disease that has struck. *It may come* as the result of a natural disaster-flood, fire, hurricane, earthquake-as it has for so many in our own country and around the world in recent months. *It may come* as we hear about yet another shooting targeting little children when we cannot reconcile the terrible suffering that goes on in our world with a loving God.

However, it may come, this is what it means when we say something has "pushed us to the edge!" That is, pushed us to the point that we realize we can no longer handle it alone. Even those who struggle with the intractable problem of theodicy may come to stand on the edge of Kierkegaard's chasm. *It can come* in a hundred different ways when our "Safety first!" program fails us.

You may have heard the story of the guy who falls off a cliff. He manages to grab a small tree on the way down and there he hangs suspended between life and death!

Knowing his grip is tenuous at best, he cries, "Oh, God, if you are up there, I beg you to save me." God replies, "Yes, my child, I am up here and I will save you. Just trust me and let go of the branch. After, a long silence, the man cries out again, "Is there anybody else up there?"

Well, there isn't anybody else up there! And, God doesn't want us to wait until we are confronted by our own deaths. He wants us to trust him *now*, so that when the time does come, it will be as natural for us to put ourselves and our loved ones into his hands, as it used to be to protect ourselves and them.

Now, God is not telling us to be foolhardy, to take stupid risks ("Do not put the Lord your God to the test!"). But he is asking us to learn to trust him now, so that we will be ready to trust him later, even if we have to start learning to trust him with baby steps. And, this is where many of us are, infants in the matter of trusting God, barely able to *walk*, much less ready to take a *leap* of faith.

But God is enormously patient with us. He starts us off with easy exercises to strengthen our faith, small risks we *can* take if we are willing.

Here is an easy one: take the risk of introducing yourself to someone you don't know after church this morning. There isn't a Sunday goes by that someone doesn't say to me: "I just don't know half the people in this church anymore." Well, there's a reason why!

So, don't scurry for the safety of the door, or protect yourself with people you do know, go meet someone you *don't know!* You'll see there is tremendous reward in taking that little risk for the sake of the faith. You'll hear the Master say, "Well done..." And your faith will be stronger.

Here's one that you might find a little harder, but doable! Commit a little time and energy to someone who needs you, beyond your family. Volunteer to spend the night here at the church with our guests at Family Promise. Of course, it's a risk, albeit a very small one. Here again you risk meeting people you don't know, people who are in difficult circumstances. But you'll see there is tremendous reward in taking that risk for the sake of the faith. You'll quickly find out these are very nice families who have just fallen on hard times. And, you'll hear the Master say, "Well done..." And your faith will be stronger for it.

As big a deal as some of us make of these things, these are the *little* risks, the baby steps, but they can teach us to take the bigger ones. Risking our time and our money and

ourselves, and discovering the joy there is in that, can lead us to risk putting ourselves into God's hands and that is what *grows* our faith. The risk called for in today's lesson is the willingness to open our lives to a power beyond our own, to trust that God will catch us if we take the leap, to believe that we and our loved ones truly *are* in his hands.

So, abandon that "*Safety first!*" motto when it comes to the faith. Take some faith risks! Not for the sake of College Church, not even for God's sake, not even for the sake of others, *but for your own sake*. So that you can discover the tremendous reward there is in taking that risk for the faith. So, you can discover "He's got the whole world in his hands..." And, then you will hear the Master say, "Well done...good and faithful servant."

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