



# “The Challenge of Being A Church”

Text: Mark 25:14-29

*a sermon by the Rev. Kevin Scott Fleming*

**Sunday, September 12, 2021**

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

This is an exciting day! Today, we begin a year-long celebration of the bicentennial year of First Presbyterian Church of Evansville, Indiana. I have no idea what those founders of 200 years ago would think of this congregation today. They might be impressed that no one had to come to church early to sweep out the glorified corn crib where services would be held. They might be surprised to find cushioned pews rather than rough cut 2x6s. They would probably be enamored of the stained glass, the roar of the organ, the sounds of the band. They would be amazed that their little town of Evansville, with a population of 300 people has grown into the third largest city in Indiana. They might be pleased – maybe even proud – that the original congregation of 12 people has grown into the congregation we are today.

There will be an entire year to talk about where we’ve been, where we are, and where we hope to be going. All of us will be involved in a planning process to strategically plot our way through the next several years. We will have happy reunions and (hopefully) gatherings where we can eat together. It will be a fantastic year-long celebration.

To begin this special time, we spend a few minutes this morning with the second of three parables that are found in the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew’s gospel. The reason will – hopefully – become clear in a few minutes.

The twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew begins with these words: “Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this.”<sup>1</sup> This suggests that the three parables contained in this chapter tell us something about the return of Jesus and the establishment of God’s empire. The first parable is the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Maidens, though we might re-title it the Parable of the Prepared and Unprepared Maidens.

Then comes our parable, often called the Parable of the Talents. In this parable, talents are not something you are naturally good at doing. It is a unit of money. One talent was 6,000 denarii – with a denarius being a day’s wage, so we are talking about a huge amount of money. The owner of a vast amount of wealth is going on a journey and entrusts his wealth to his servants. He gives them no instruction. He gives the money to them and leaves.

What should the servants do with the money entrusted to them? Two decide to make more money with what they had been given. We are not told how they did it, but they doubled the money entrusted to them. The third servant dug a hole and buried the money for safe-keeping.

The master returns home after “a long time,” suggesting a delay in the master’s return. He calls the servants forward. The one who had received five talents returned them with 100% interest. The one who had received two talents returned them with 100% interest. The one who had received the one talent returned it to the master.

Two servants are praised and called good and are commended for their oversight and effort. But for the third servant, commendation turns into condemnation. The third slave is called wicked, not “good,” and the master calls for him to be cast “into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”<sup>2</sup>

This is no simple, uncomplicated parable. It is, frankly, one of the most abused texts in the New Testament.<sup>3</sup> For our purposes today, the parable is not about the return of Jesus. Neither is it about the urge to celebrate capitalism that is often embraced by those who preach the text. And, today, it is not even a lesson in stewardship, which is often where this parable is employed.

No, I want us to consider the servants and their response to being entrusted with the money. One interpretive tool may prove helpful. What if the servants are representative of the disciples Jesus leaves behind? What if this parable is about how the disciples are to live and work while Jesus is away?

The master gives the servants no instruction. So, they are left wondering about what they should do. We don’t know exactly what they did, but we know that two earned their master’s praise and one earned far less.

What made the difference? Two servants embraced risk and one did not. Two servants moved forward knowing full well that they could lose everything they had been given. One was so frightened of that possibility that the gift was buried in a hole. Two servants took a chance. One played the sure bet. Two servants gambled on success. One servant attempted to avoid disaster.

So, maybe – just maybe – the lesson for us today is about the role of risk and danger inherent in being faithful disciples. After all, that was key to the praise and recognition given to those servants who had

embraced the uncertainty and insecurity of tending to their master's business.

Being the church is not easy. It probably wasn't that easy for those twelve hearty souls who began the journey we continue. Throughout the history of the church – universal and this congregation in particular – being faithful disciples has never been easy. It has never been safe. It has never been shielded. It has never been free from danger.

Authentic ministry has always involved risk. There are very few guarantees in ministry. Helen Keller said, "Security is mostly a superstition. It does not exist in nature." It doesn't exist in the church either.

A couple of years ago, the church universal was in a time of change and turmoil. It was called "The Great Emergence." The church was changing as it does every 500 years or so. The late Phyllis Tickle told the story she heard from a pastor who observed that every five hundred years the church has a yard sale. We put everything out and see who wants what and the stuff no one wants, we get rid of. That's what we were doing.

Then COVID arrived and everything shut down. We had to scramble to find a way to be church. Could we be church without our building? Could we be church without physically seeing each other? Could we continue life-saving and life-enhancing ministries and mission, or would the money dry up? Could we celebrate the sacraments, or would we have to leave the font and table behind?

And we made it all up as we moved ahead. We figured out how to broadcast over the internet using nothing more than an iPhone. We increased online communication. We figured out how Zoom classes and meetings could be held. It was a risk that had to be embraced. We had no other choice.

Then came cameras in the sanctuary and a more sophisticated way to share worship. Then we were able to return with precautions, which was a risk we each chose to embrace. And now we are able to bring back limited programming for the fall season.

But, still, we have no idea what ministry and mission will look like after COVID is consigned to history. The church was in the midst of a tsunami of change before COVID and it will face a seismic sea change after COVID.

Yet, I am totally convinced that there is no more exciting time to be the church – a gathering of Christ's disciples – than this amazing moment. We are in a moment when the world is listening for a caring and prophetic voice. We are in a moment where injustice in its many guises is on the rise. We are in a moment when reason and intellect are wanting. We are in a moment when division and disunion threaten to drag us all down. We are in a moment when faith and science need to be in conversation.

Now, have I missed it, or is this not a great time to be the church? The world is looking for what we have. The world may not know it, but the world is looking for what we have been about for 2,000 years in the world and 200 years in Evansville.

But, in order to bring that good news of justice and equality and compassion and hope to the world and our town, we will need to embrace risk and accept challenges – some of which we have never faced before. Please remember, before COVID, the church in America was on a downhill trajectory. Nothing has changed in that pattern. So, to continue to do things as we have done them before simply insures failure.

It's time we had our own yard sale. It's time to put everything we have and everything we are out on tables and see what is still important and what is no longer necessary. It's time to let the world – and, in particular, the City of Evansville – decide what we can provide that is important and helpful and it is time to allow them to tell us what is no longer significant or valuable to them.

New risks will present themselves. New challenges will abound. New dangers will thrive.

But, we have the promise that God is with us. We have the assurance that “nothing can separate us from the love of God.” We have the guarantee that where two or three are gathering in Christ's name, he is there in the midst. We have the guarantee of the Spirit's wisdom, guidance, and enabling power that will enable us to do what we are called to do.

The medieval Sephardic Jewish scholar and philosopher, Moses Maimonides reminds us: “The risk of a wrong decision is preferable to the terror of indecision.” As we move forward we will make some wrong decisions. We will make some questionable choices. We may fail from time to time.

But embracing risks is the challenge of being a church. We manage the risks as best we can. We make sensible choices when they present themselves.

Still, when the choice is to do something new, something we haven't tried before, something that may be outside of our experience – we must give it honest consideration. This is not the time to revert to the church's seven last words: “But we've always done it this way.”

Our third century begins here and begins now. God is calling us. The Risen Christ is with us. The Spirit is guiding and empowering. Let us take up the challenge of being the church – a new church – an improved church – and life-changing church.

And to God be the glory. For now and evermore. Amen.

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1) Matthew 25:1

2) Matthew 25:30

3) Carla Works, *Working Preacher.com*