

Risky Christianity

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, November 17, 1996. Scripture Lessons: Judges 4:1-7; Psalm 123; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Imagine a posh, spacious, executive office, the kind that you might see over at Herr's executive headquarters or at the Peoples' Bank of Oxford - except the office I have in mind is far more posh than any office Jim Herr or Carl Fretz would want to sit in. Imagine the kind of office you might see in New York City, on Wall Street. Wood paneling. Crystal chandeliers. Thick oriental carpets. A well stocked bar. A telephone on the executives desk with about 20 blinking lights. Behind the desk sits a large man in his late sixties, suntanned, impeccable silver gray hair, tailored made suit, the very image of success and wealth, having made millions on the stock market. He reaches for the telephone, calls his secretary, "Send in Thomasa, Dick, and that new woman, Harriet." Within moments the secretary opens the door and escorts in three well dressed employees, all stockbrokers.

The executive leans back in his chair, takes a big puff on his illegally imported Cuban cigar, blows out the smoke, and says in a gravelly voice, "I'm going away for a long, well deserved vacation." Unsmiling he continues, "You know I'm a no-nonsense man. I reward those who do a good job. I don't hesitate to ax anyone who loses money for this company. You three will run this place while I'm going and oversee all my investments. Thomasa, you're in charge of the alpha funds worth 50 million dollars.

Dick, you get the beta funds worth 25 million. And Harriet, you're new around here, so you get the little 5 million dollar gamma fund to play with while I'm gone."

Six months later the boss returns. Thomasa steps forward confidently, arrogantly, "I doubled the alpha fund. You gave me 50 million. It's now worth 100, 000." "Well done, Thomasa." Dick steps forward. "The 25 million dollar beta fund is now worth 50 million." "Well done. You did pretty well with that little, paltry sum of money. I'll see you get a bigger account next time."

Next Harriet steps forward trembling. "Harriet", the boss says. "You don't look so hot. Been sick?" Harriet nervously rings her hands, "Boss. I know how much you hate to lose even a dime. So, rather than risk any loss, I just sat on gamma account. It's still worth 5 million dollars. I didn't lose one red cent."

Silence! The chief executive stares in disbelief, hardly comprehending what Harriet has just told him. Then he explodes, "What kind of lousy stockbroker are you? Nobody hires a broker just to keep their money safe, you idiot. Get out of my sight. You got a half hour to clean out your desk. You're out of here. And, by the way, Thomasa, you take over the gamma fund."

So, what do we get out of this little story? It's certainly not a lesson in investment strategy. There's no encouragement to hand over our special funds to John Bennett. And as much as it hurts me to say this, it has nothing to do with giving money to

the church. But the parable is about stewardship. Listen to how I imagine Jesus addressing this parable to our church.

The Risen Christ says to us, "I've given you the Oxford Presbyterian Church investment portfolio. I've entrusted a 4 million dollar building to you. Look at this sanctuary! It holds nearly 400 people even without the balcony. I want you to fill that sanctuary with people who need to hear the gospel. Go downstairs and walk through the completed Christian Education building which will easily accommodate 150 students, men, women, and children. When completed the Christian education will easily provide space for 250 - 300 students. Now", the Risen Lord says to us, "I want you take whatever risks that are required in order for you to fill that sanctuary and the Christian education building. Invest the time and money and energy and imagination that I've given you to fill this building. This town needs to know that I'm alive. This town needs to know that I love them. This town needs to know that I died for them. This town needs to know they're forgiven."

"I've given you time and energy and imagination and money. Use what I've given and fill this place! If you don't, I'll come and say, "Take that sanctuary and Christian Education building away from those lazy, worthless Presbyterians, and give it to those uneducated Pentecostals with their drums and guitars. They'll know how to fill it."

We bury this church building in the dirt, unless we risk using it; opening it up more and more to the community - reaching

out in bold and innovative ways to the new people in our community and to the unchurched.

But Jesus addresses this parable, not only to the church as a whole, but to each one of us as individually. You and I have received a variety of gifts from God. Some have more than others, but God gives every one a certain measure of intelligence and skill. Every member of this church should have a job. It's largely the responsibility of the session to provide those jobs. But it's also the responsibility of every member to look for ways you can use your God given talents to enlarged and strengthen God's kingdom.

This involves risk - substantial risk. Not the risk of the stock market, but the realization that life under God is, in and of itself, a risky business.

For example - Marriage is a gift from God, yet marriage is a risk. We dare to risk our own individualism in the hope of finding a better life merged with another. And in today's America the odds of success are about 50-50.

And children are a gift from God. Yet raising children is a risk. Maybe they'll turn out OK, but maybe not. And yet we dare to risk having children. We invest our time and energy and love in raising them with the hope that one day they'll come to know and love Jesus and live their lives serving God and neighbor.

And it's risky to be a citizen in a representative democracy. I was appalled to read that less than 50% of all the eligible voters in the US bothered to take fifteen minutes to vote. That's poor stewardship of the great gift of freedom. I

can hear the Lord say one day to us, "You lazy slaves. You never took the trouble to vote. I'm taking your freedom from you and giving it to someone else."

Above all our faith in Jesus Christ is a risk. Commit yourselves in faith to Jesus Christ and you're taking a big risk. Try proving scientifically that Jesus rose from the dead. Try proving scientifically that God really exists and rules in human affairs. You can't do it. Faith in God is risky. Faith is a risk because it's not possible *first* to be certain and *then* to commit ourselves to the Lord Jesus Christ. The commitment comes first, then the certainty.

And it's a great risk when we commit ourselves to a church whose faults we sometimes can see all too well. The temptation, of course, is to play it safe. Join the church, just in case it really is the body of Christ, but don't risk attending regularly - don't risk investing your time and energy in Sunday School or a small group Bible study or some other form of service - Don't risk getting involved since you may find your lifestyle altered radically.

But I urge you, take the risk of discipleship. Risk using your talents in the service of the Lord Jesus Christ. Don't bury your talents. We need you. I need you. The Lord Jesus Christ needs you. I urge you - risk.

Let us pray: God our Father, you have given us a measure of faith, and told us to be good investors. Keep us busy, brave, and unashamed, ever ready to greet your Son Jesus Christ, our judge and our redeemer. Amen.