

Nov. 13, 2011

A TALENT SHOW

One Sunday morning, the priest at St. Matthew Catholic Church in Boyne City was preparing for worship when the choir director came up to him. “Father Frank,” she said, “the choir has something a little radical we are doing at the start of worship today, so don’t be surprised. Just go with the flow.”

So as services were about to begin, Father Frank wasn’t concerned when voices began to be heard over the sound system. People in the congregation kept looking around, but they couldn’t see who was speaking. The head usher came over and asked, “What’s going on?” But Father Frank assured him, “Don’t worry – it’s something radical that the choir is doing.”

A few more seconds passed as the strange voices continued over the speakers. Now, the lay leader came to Father Frank and asked, “What’s going on?” But again, Father Frank said, “Don’t worry – it’s something radical that the choir is doing.”

After a few more seconds of listening to these disembodied voices, Father Frank felt a tap on his shoulder, turned around to see the choir director standing there, asking, “Father Frank, what’s going on?”

Realizing now that this was not the choir’s doing, Father Frank started listening to what was coming over their speakers – and realized they were hearing Christ Lutheran Church’s worship service taking place across the street. That congregation had just installed a brand new wireless microphone that week, and had unknowingly set it at the same frequency as the speaker system within Father Frank’s church. Having Lutherans trying to convert Catholics – now that, my friends, is radical.

When it comes to the story of the talents, the first response we might have is to wonder why the third servant gets into so much trouble. Mind you, he did not lie or do anything worthy of a scandal. He didn't embezzle or lose any part of that which was entrusted to him. He was able to return in full the one talent. What's so wrong with what he did?

And the answer is, the man did nothing. He wasn't just cautious – he was fearful to the point of inaction. God wants us to be radical, to take risks. And make no mistake on this Stewardship Sunday: God is calling us to be radical in all dimensions of our discipleship.

One word of explanation: A talent in the old days was not an exact measurement of worth the way a coin would have been. A talent was a measurement of weight, like an ounce or a pound. So the value of a talent depended upon whether it was gold, silver or another commodity being weighed.

Whatever the exact value, there is a sense that the master was entrusting a lot of wealth to the servants. There are no instructions as to what to do with it, but all three have the same idea: The master expects it to be multiplied and returned to him when he comes back home.

There is a long delay, but the master does return home. The first servant, entrusted with 5 talents, has turned it into 10. The second servant, who started with 2 talents, now has 4.

The master praises the first two servants and rewards each of them with two things. First, more responsibility – isn't that the truth! When we do something well, we know we will be asked to do it again. And again. And again.....

But certainly, it is understandable. When someone does well on a project, that's the person we want working on our next project. They've demonstrated a knack for doing the right thing, making the right decisions, and so we want them working on our team.

Note however the second part of the reward for their hard work. They receive joy in the master's presence. They not only are given further work; they receive praise and honors from the master for the risk they took.

But then, the third servant shows up: the one who simply buried the talent in the ground and now brings it back to the master. Here it is: the one talent you gave to me – maybe a little dirty, but returned in whole.

Now don't get this story wrong. There's nothing wrong with being cautious. I dare say when we got up on Friday morning and saw an inch of snow on the ground, we began pulling out boots and heavier jackets, made sure we had an ice scraper in the car, and did the penguin walk until we were assured that the sidewalks weren't slick. It is good to be prudent and wary at times.

However, I know a person that had she been here Friday, she would have canceled all plans that took place outside of the house. She wouldn't have gone to the grocery, to the neighbors or even a church event. And it is the same story when it is rainy, windy, too hot or too cold, if it was flu season, or sometimes "just because." And when I marveled at this one day, someone who had known the woman as a child explained that the woman's mother had lost another child before it was 10 years old. And after that, she had kept this daughter home from school anytime she was afraid of something that might hurt her. The mother and now the daughter weren't just cautious; they had allowed their caution to turn to fear, and their fear to an obsession that paralyzed their lives.

This is the problem with the third servant. He isn't just cautious. His caution had turned into self-protection and restraint to the point that he did nothing. And it's interesting that a part of his fear, as the man explained to the master, was that he knew the master was harsh, "reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter seed." The servant knew if he

gained any interest on this talent, it wouldn't be his to keep. He was afraid it, like the talent, would go right back to his master. So why bother?

But consider for a moment: Who did the talent belong to in the first place? The servant didn't own the talent; the master did. The master is the one who had trusted the servant enough to give him the talent to begin with. And so when it is returned intact but without any action, the servant is punished. What he has is taken away from him, and he loses the master's joy.

What is represented by this parable? Jesus reminds us what he has been saying all along. His time with the disciples is limited; he is on his way to the cross. But even after resurrection, Jesus cannot stay on earth. He will return to heaven to be with God the Father.

But he will return again. Christ will return again one day, even though – as the parable says – a good deal of time will pass. And when Christ returns, there will be an accounting of what has been entrusted to the disciples by Jesus and by God. The question will be, what have we done with what has been given to us? What kind of stewards are we?

This parable calls each one of us to be faithful stewards by being risk-takers. This parable reminds us that God gives us everything; God is the owner of the talents and master of the house. And because we are His servants, we like him are supposed to take risks.

Just consider the risks Jesus took. He associated with sinners. He healed people on the Sabbath. He preached the unconditional love of God. He gave the talents of his teachings and ministry to 12 disciples. And we already know that like the third servant, one disciple – Judas Iscariot – completely dropped the ball.

Being a disciple of Jesus Christ is a risk because it means love, and love demands taking risks. Entering marriage is a risk. Becoming a parent is a risk. Even entering into a friendship is a

risk. If we dare to love, then we risk being vulnerable to heartbreak. It is a risk – but most of us would agree the risk is worth the rewards.

This past week, I attended the Vital Congregations presentation at Cornerstone United Methodist Church. Bishop Sheol encouraged us to take risks as churches – and not to worry when we try a new ministry that fails. God is happier when we try and learn from our mistakes than when we sit back and do nothing.

I want to commend this church for the pledge cards you have used in previous Stewardship Sundays and which we again used this year. Often, a church sending out pledge cards only addresses our financial gifts for the coming year.

Reed City's pledge card has all the things that we vowed to do when we became members of this church: we pledged our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service and our witness to God. I want to thank all those who pledged to pray daily for our congregation; to attend worship regularly; to strengthen their devotional life; to serve in the church; and to give to the work and mission of Jesus Christ. By these pledges, we are witnesses: and that is a risk for each of us individually. And God is pleased.

And now, I encourage us to consider: where do we as a congregation – as the body of Christ – need to become a risk taker? Where is there a need for ministry in this community that we could boldly step forward, because God has given us the talent? What need is there for changes in worship that we need to risk trying? How might we next year, or in two years or even 5 years celebrate a radical venture we undertook in 2012 that resulted in five talents turning into 10, or even 2 talents turning into 4?

Let us seek as individuals and as a church to work toward the day we too hear the words, “Well done, good and faithful servants.”

