

The Twenty Seventh Sunday after Pentecost ~ Proper 28, Year A  
November 19, 2008  
The Rev. Brett Backus, Deacon

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## “Risk And The Growth Of The Kingdom”

Matthew 25:14-30

*“For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance;  
but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.”*

The clock says 11:15 as I step out of the old taxi and breathe in the crisp night air. What was a busy market by day has now transformed itself into what seems like a decayed and forgotten world. The streets are filthy, reeking of alcohol and sickness, and the heavy stench of danger eases a large knot into my stomach. Saying nothing, and very unsure about what I was going to see next, the rest of the group and I gather a ration of food and medical supplies and slowly begin walking down the dark street. I can remember asking one of the group members what the awful odor was that I was smelling. He told me that it was a mixture of the fumes from the hardware glue that the people huff to get high and alleviate hunger, and the stench of infected wounds that have not been properly cared for.

As we rounded the corner, I caught my first glimpse of one of the most horrid scenes I had ever witnessed. It was a large group of people - some teenagers, some adults, some mothers with newborns, some pregnant, and even some whole families with children - the majority of them were huddled together on the dirty street for warmth, while others stumbled about crying, fighting, mumbling. They were extremely intoxicated, and their eyes seemed as though their bodies lacked life. This all took place almost completely unnoticed or ignored by the rest of the people in that area of the city at night, who come to buy sex, get drunk, and have a good time.

What I just read to you was a journal entry that I wrote about a week after returning from my first mission work in Bolivia. I wanted to share that entry with you all this morning as an example of what I think today's Gospel is all about. Today's Gospel is about taking risks. It's about stepping out in faith and using the gifts that God has given each of us to serve His people and to further the presence of His Kingdom on earth.

Though at first today's Gospel seems to be focusing on material growth and gain, we know that Jesus is pointing us to a much deeper learning in His message today. Jesus in today's Gospel is telling us in essence to use them or lose them. You see, Jesus is trying to teach us today that as Christians we are to use our God-given abilities, and we are to take advantage of the opportunities that God presents to us in service of Him. Now I am in no way suggesting that in order to use our God-given abilities we must all go to a third world country and participate in a street ministry (though you may be called to do so as well).

What I am suggesting is that today's gospel requires us as Christians to take action. It requires us to take risks and to put our God-given gifts and abilities into action in the service of God and the Body of Christ, and though it may be hard for us to hear, today's Gospel also warns us about the consequences of our not doing so.

See I think that this journal entry is a useful example today because for everyone who went in that first group from the Tyson House, going to Bolivia was a huge risk. For all of us at the time, Bolivia was the unknown. Yet at the same time, in faithfully responding to God and stepping into the unknown, we were all made aware of and called to put to use our individual gifts of compassion for the needy, our language abilities in some instances, our passion for intercultural relationships, and our overall love of God's creation in a way that glorified God and spread the growth of His Kingdom on earth. That is what today's Gospel is all about.

Now, when I was preparing for this sermon today, I realized that for us Episcopalians and for us as members of Ascension, this Gospel message can be both difficult and at the same time encouraging. It can be difficult to hear today's call to action because in some sense, we as Christians today look at the Church only as a service to us as individuals and families. We have our struggles and problems, and we look to the Church for guidance and renewal. This is of course one of the main functions of the Church, but the reality is that the Church is so much more. What I want to say here is that we as Christians have to be careful about only viewing the Church as an entity which serves our own spiritual needs. We as Christians must begin to recognize and live into the fact that all of us together are what makes up the church and that we as the church do not exist only to serve ourselves, but we exist in order that we may serve the world and represent the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. All of us together make up the priesthood of all believers.

On the other hand, today's Gospel message can be very encouraging. It can be encouraging because I look out at our community here at Ascension and even in the short time that I have been here, I see so many of you who do so many things in the name of God both in and for this Church and for the greater community.

So, I guess what I am trying to do today is to both lift up and celebrate the great work and risk taking that is being done here at Ascension in the name of God, and yet at the same time to challenge us to do more. Perhaps it is difficult to see if you are not here day in and day out like I am, but there truly is a wonderful energy present here in our Ascension community that seems to just breed action and service. Just in the few months that I have been here, I have witnessed a handful of great new ministries begin. I have seen just how committed this church is to outreach for the needy in our own community, and I have witnessed a growing number of vibrant families and children who both lead and participate in programs which enrich individual lives both in and outside of Ascension's walls. This truly is a wonderful place to be right now.

Yet there remains a need to challenge us all today as well. I would like to challenge and encourage us all today to take a moment and examine just how faithfully each of us uses our God-given abilities or talents in the service of the Lord. Do we actually take advantage of the incredible opportunities to serve others that God places before us? Now, as I said before, using your abilities in the service of God does not necessarily mean that you have to go on a big mission trip (oh, but by the way, if you do feel you have abilities or talents that would possibly be helpful to mission work and you feel you may be called to do so, plans for a mission trip to Bolivia this summer is in the works so please let me know. The opportunity has just been presented to you). Even though using our abilities in the service of God does not necessarily mean that we must go on a mission trip, I do want to drive the point home today that using our talents as Christians in the service of God will involve risks, and today's Gospel suggests that taking these risks is better than not acting at all.

Our talents and abilities, and the risks that face us in using these blessings can be different for all of us. If you have been blessed with wealth, pledging a full tithe or deciding to financially support a ministry or mission is a risk, especially in today's economy. If God has blessed you with the ability or desire to lead, starting up a new ministry or group within the church involves risk. Being blessed with the social skills, social connections, and the opportunity to evangelize or invite people you hardly know to church and to talk about God with them involves risk. There are so many kinds of talents and abilities that God blesses each of us with, and there are so many opportunities that He gives us to use these abilities to serve Him. That is what Jesus is urging us to do in today's Gospel, to act, to use our God-given abilities, and to take advantage of the opportunity to serve regardless of whatever the risk may be.

You know, every time the vestry meets here at Ascension, we say a prayer together which asks that we may not be content with the way things are, that we may not be satisfied and as a result cease to grow as a church community and as Christians. I think that that would be my prayer for us all today as well, and I think that that is exactly what Jesus in today's Gospel is trying to say to us. Today Jesus warns us of spiritual stagnancy, of spiritual inactivity. He reminds us that we are given many blessings in this life and many opportunities in which to use these blessings, but if we fail to do so, even the blessings that we have will be taken away from us. Brothers and Sisters in Christ, today I want to lift up the great work and energy that is put forth and witnessed here at Ascension in the name of God. However, I also want to encourage all of us today to begin seriously reflecting on and considering exactly what abilities or talents we have been blessed with as individuals, and what the opportunities are for using such blessings. I encourage us all today to consider these aspects of our lives and finally, I encourage us, if we feel called to do so, to act, regardless of whatever risk we may be faced with.

In thinking about this connection we have spoken about today between Christian service and risk, I decided that I would like to end this sermon with a small poem written by someone who many here at Ascension hold in high regards. It is a short poem written by Father Chris Chase only hours after we departed from Bolivia after our first mission trip together. In this poem which reflects on the exact same experience I shared with you from my journal entry, I would like you all to pay attention to the way in which Chris recognizes this Christian call of ours to serve and yet to serve in the face of risk.

“They were certainly strange chariots for angels; Toyota taxis. And, yet, they descended into Hell and broke the hold of the demons - which is the work of angels. He with his broad, bold smile of joy. Her with her loving touch. He with his offer of food. Her with her tender care of a festering sore. Maybe it is easier to see angels in the midst of hell. But it is where Jesus went. Maybe it would have been hard to see Jesus had he not descended into hells with his broad, bold smile of joy; his loving touch; his offer of food; his tender healing. Ours is an awesome call, still with a ridiculous call to enter into hells.”

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, recognize your God-given talents, recognize the opportunities God gives you to use such talents, act, and grow as Christians in the service of our Lord. *Amen.*