

Study Guide for November 19, 2017

Theme: Taking Risks With Faith

Matthew 25:14-30; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Psalm 90:1-12

This week's readings from Matthew and Thessalonians provide us with some serious contemplation and thinking about who we are as faithful followers of Jesus Christ, and what we are doing with our faith for God's kingdom. Both have a sense of urgency that might trigger a fretful, fearful, or forget it all together attitude in you. But as I see it, Jesus is reminding us in Matthew's gospel that we don't have to worry about "the investment" but stay focused on "taking the risk." So may you never lose sight of the fact that when you take the risk to love, the Spirit of God works through you and does all the heavy lifting.

In Paul's letter to the churches in Thessalonica, the Apostle understands that as long as Christians exist in the world, they will live with plenty of anxiety. So Paul gives us this assurance that we have received a great gift in the saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As such, God has called us out to live in the light, in constant preparedness, knowing that when trouble comes, the Spirit of Christ's saving love will sustain us. The best evidence we have of God's assurance and love is one another. When God is lifting us up, carrying our load, sustaining our strength through hard and difficult times, God does so through us. We help one another by being the love and strength of Jesus Christ.

God invites us to invest in the gifts that were given to us; to love as we've been loved, and forgive as we have been forgiven. For what Jesus' parable teaches us most clearly is the greatest risk (and perhaps the greatest fear as well) is not taking a risk at all. God doesn't want us to play it safe and bury our faith deep within us. God wants us to put it out into the world. Since we could never repay God for the saving love given to us through Jesus Christ, God calls us to pay it forward. That's all.

We are ministers to each other. This takes risks, overcoming fears and anxieties, and relying hard on the assurance and promise of God who is faithful, forgiving, and overflowing with more love than you could ever imagine.

Henri Nouwen: "Ministry is acting in the Name of Jesus. When all our actions are in the Name, they will bear fruit for eternal life. This doesn't mean to act as a representative or spokesperson, but to act in an intimate communion with him from the place where we are united with Jesus in love. To the question "Where are you?" we should be able to answer, "I am in the Name." Then, whatever we do cannot be other than ministry because it will always be Jesus himself who acts in and through us. The final question for all who minister is "Are you in the Name of Jesus?" When we can say yes to that, all of our lives will be ministry."

Read: Matthew 25:14-30; Luke 19:11-27

Q: Can you sum up the basic theme of this entire parable in one sentence?

Jesus tells these stories during his final days of life to warn his disciples of the impending “*eschaton*” (es-ka-ton), or the end time. This is the third of four stories that center on the “master” or the “bridegroom” and the judgments that come with their return. At first glance it might seem like grim news, doesn’t it? But really it’s good news, especially for those who are prepared, and who are willing to invest in their faith.

Q: What is the greatest risk you have taken in the last month? Lifetime?

Q: What would you do if you knew you could not fail and how far would you go?

Read: Matthew 25:14-15

Matthew’s gospel story is a wonderful reminder of God’s generosity and self-limitation. Although the passage starts abruptly, I invite you also end abruptly as well. I believe it’s in these two verses we get all that we need to know about God and ourselves. And it paints a great portrait of the kingdom of heaven both now and to come. Notice it begins with great and divine generosity shown to others. Like creation itself it is a gift given freely.

Take a moment to look at your life, the room or the space that you are sitting in, and see all the wonderful things that God has given you. Even if you are feeling empty and alone, it’s impossible to see something or to feel something and not see God’s impression.

Read: Matthew 25:19-21

The faithful servant who was given so much invests the money wisely and reaps a great reward for his master and for himself (five talents = 75 years worth of wages...in gold!). What I find most promising isn’t the “monetary reward” but the words of the master who not only entrusted his servant with generosity, but also gave him the space to be creative, to take chances and grow and flourish. When the servant does what he was entrusted to do, notice how the master responds.

Q: What one word jumps out at you in these three verses?

Q: If God, our Divine Master, were to call you forward today, what would you like to hear God say to you? (*Write that down on a card, and place it in your bible or somewhere you will see it frequently.*)

Slow Read: Psalm 90:1-12

Focus your attention on where God has been and where God is now. Picture yourself in this psalm, with God; the Creator with the created. When you are ready, pray the Lord’s Prayer.

Prayer: Holy God, giver of life, graciously comfort me as I step out into faith to live as Christ taught me to live. Keep your Spirit with me as I take a chance today to share your love with someone in need of your divine love, even if it is just me who needs it today. Amen.