

Get out of That Bunker
Matthew 25:14-30

In his first inaugural address Franklin Delano Roosevelt said, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” Those are words we need to hear again today. When he said that, the country was in the midst of the Great Depression. Roosevelt was saying that the economy is driven by the emotional state of the people. Nowadays we understand that pretty clearly. That’s why the economic leaders are constantly polling people and announcing what the public confidence index is. It’s the best indicator of the direction the economy is going. When people believe the economy is doing well, they are willing to take more risks. They make more things, because they believe they will be able to sell them. They buy more, because they are not worried about needing the money tomorrow. And because people are buying and selling, there are more jobs. And when there are more jobs, there are more people buying and selling. When people lose their confidence in the economy, people stop buying and selling and producing. Jobs are cut. So, there are less people buying and selling. Everything comes to a grinding halt.

It is fear that turns a glitch in the economic system into an economic disaster. There will always be glitches in the system. When we encounter them, we can fix them. It is fear that turns a glitch into a depression. We have nothing to fear, but fear itself.

It turns out that is true in the spiritual world as well. Jesus told a story about it.

A rich man gave money to three of his employees. He told them he was going on a trip. They were to invest the money while he was gone. He gave one five talents of gold, one two talents and the last he gave one talent. A talent of gold is 58 pounds. Today gold is worth about \$740 an ounce. So, a talent of gold is worth at least \$700,000. So, the first servant was given the equivalent of more than \$3,500,000. They say it takes money to make money. You give me \$3,500,000 and even I could make a profit, and I know little or nothing about business. It just takes a little time and effort to locate a money-making business and buy it. Even \$700,000 will make a profit if you work at it. Buy a Subway franchise. When he returned, two of his money managers had invested the man’s money for him, and they had done well. They each doubled the man’s money through their investments. That’s a mighty fine rate of return. The third man had a low public confidence index. He thought to himself, “Why should I work hard to make money for this guy. I don’t even like him. And if I lose the money, he’ll make my life miserable. I’ll just bury it in the ground.” Burying it in the ground was the equivalent of putting money in a checking account that you don’t intend to use. It may be safe. But it’s not very smart. Inflation will eat up the value of the money. This servant was afraid to take any risks. When the boss returned, he was pleased with the first two servants and rewarded them. He was angry with the last servant and cast him into the outer darkness, where there is wailing and gnashing of teeth.

So, what is Jesus saying? Is he saying that your salvation depends on your willingness to make risky investments?

Well, no. He is saying not to be afraid. Fear is the place of wailing and gnashing of teeth. When we become afraid to live, we have been cast out into the outer darkness.

Christ has a huge investment in us. He has given us the Word of God. He poured out his life for us. He has given us his Spirit. He expects us to use what he has given to us to make a profit for the Kingdom. He expects us to work for the salvation of souls, to teach people to live holy and righteous lives, and to grow the Kingdom of God on earth. He has given us all we need to do these things. All we have to do is be willing to take a reasonable risk. The only way we can fail is to dig a hole and bury ourselves in it.

Recently I heard a man I'll call Bill tell a story that illustrates this. He joined a group of men who went jogging several mornings a week. He knew some of them. And some of them he didn't know. He introduced himself to one of the men. They got into a pleasant conversation. Bill asked the man what church he attended. The man kind of growled and said, "I don't go to any church. Church people are hypocritical, judgmental and mean-spirited. I don't want anything to do with them." Well, Bill realized he had three options, and two of them were ways of crawling into a hole. The first was to just avoid this guy. The second was to hide the fact that he was not only a member of a church, but was very active in his church. He decided not to do either of those things. He decided to take a little risk. Each morning he would take a few minutes before or after the jog to talk with this man. When he was involved in something special at his church, he would mention it. After a few months the man confided that he was up for a promotion that he very much wanted and needed. Bill told him that he would pray for him. A few days later Bill found out that the man did indeed get the promotion. He wrote out a note of congratulations to him and put a gift certificate to a nice local restaurant. He wrote in his note that the man was to use the certificate to take his wife out and celebrate his promotion. The next day when the joggers gathered, this man came over to Bill with tears in his eyes and thanked him. He said, "Why in the world would you take the time to write a note to me and give me a gift certificate so that my wife and I could go out and celebrate my promotion?" Bill said, "I don't know what kind of church people you have dealt with in the past, but at my church we believe Christ has called us to care about people. That means sharing people's joys and their sorrows. I'm excited for you, and I wanted to share this joy with you." The man was transformed by that experience. Eventually he joined a church and became an active member.

That's making a profit for Christ. It meant taking a little risk, but not all that much. The main thing Bill did was to choose not to dig a hole and hide in it.

Don't be afraid to take a risk. Why should we be? God has already guaranteed that those who are willing to invest themselves will make a profit for the Kingdom.

Instead of living in fear, we should take the example of Jeremiah. There is an amazing story in the 32nd chapter of Jeremiah. Jeremiah is in prison. He has been thrown into prison by King Zedekiah. Zedekiah was angry with Jeremiah, because Jeremiah had been prophesying that God would allow the Babylonians to conquer Jerusalem and Judea, because of the sins of the Jews.

While Jeremiah was in prison, his cousin came to him and asked him to buy a parcel of land from him. Now think about this. Jeremiah has been prophesying that the Babylonians would soon invade them and take all the land and everything else away from them. And here is his cousin asking him to buy some land. Talk about your high risk investments.

But Jeremiah did it. He got the money together and brought in the witnesses. He got a bill of sale. Then he put the deed and the bill of sale and put them in a clay vase and sealed it. Then he said to the people, "I know you're wondering why I bought this land, since I believe the land will be taken from us. I'm doing this because the Lord told me to do it. And he told me to tell you that someday this land will once again be ours to buy and sell." This wasn't a risky investment. Jeremiah had inside information. This was insider trading. He was willing to buy this land because he trusted God's word that the difficulties of the present time would not last forever. He was not afraid to take a risk because he trusted God.

Jesus is telling us that as Christians we must not give in to a bunker mentality. We must not spend our days digging holes in the back yard to hide in. A life of fear is to live in the outer darkness where there is wailing and gnashing of teeth.

Jesus calls us to climb out of our holes and live boldly and fearlessly.

One time I was watching a television documentary about an international contest among the best and brightest young piano players in the world. Two of the best contestants were interviewed before the contest. The first pianist said, "I believe the judges are looking for a flawless performance. I will concentrate on not making any mistakes in my performance." The second pianist had a totally different approach. He said, "I'm not worried about mistakes. I just want to make beautiful music. I will play my heart out and let the judges make the decision they think is best." Then we saw their performances. The first pianist did play flawlessly. But there was no joy or inspiration in his music. The second pianist played with all his heart. If there were any mistakes, I didn't hear them. There were so many notes flying in so many directions, he could have played some wrong notes. It wouldn't have mattered. His music was deeply moving. He, of course, was given first place in the competition.

Our goal, as Christians, should not be to live a flawless life. Our goal should be to bring joy and love into this world, to touch hearts and move people. You can't do that if you are buried in a safe hole. You have to take risks. You have to invest yourself in people. You have to give yourself to the places where Christ has called you to serve. Our goal should be increasing the Kingdom of God, not avoiding getting black marks against us on God's naughty or nice list.

The strange thing is that people who concentrate on loving people, rather than trying not to make mistakes, are less likely to make mistakes. Well, it's not so strange. At its heart, sin is always being unloving or doing unloving things. Loving people just naturally do the right thing. That's why Peter said that love covers a multitude of sins. If you want to be a truly righteous person, don't enter a monastery and spend your days trying to get rid of sinful thoughts and feelings. That's digging a hole and burying yourself in it.

No, invest yourself in people. Be with them. Love them. Care for them. You may say something that you regret. You may do something you wish you hadn't done. But your heart will be in the right place. And, more often than not, you will say the right thing and do the right thing. The world will be a better place because of you.

Let us be like the first two servants, who went out into the world looking for ways to make a profit for their master. They put aside their fears and took risks. They bought and sold. They lived openly, freely and boldly.

If we will have faith and trust God, we will be willing to take the risks that must be taken to move forward and grow, and our God will say to us, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your master.”

When our nation and the world learn that lesson, this recession will be over. When the producers have enough faith to take risks, they will produce. When the employers have enough faith to take risks, they will employ people again. When the sellers have enough faith to take risks, they will buy products to sell. When the lenders have faith again, they will not be afraid to lend. When the buyers have faith, they will buy. When the givers have faith, they will give.

There is nothing to fear, but fear itself. That’s true in the business world. It’s even truer in the spiritual world.

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