

Responsibility
Matthew 25: 14-30
November 19, 2017

Rev. Dr. John M. Buchanan
First Presbyterian Church
Lake Forest, Illinois

It's the season of Thanksgiving, my favorite holiday for several reasons. The first is that Christmas downtown where I live arrives a few weeks before Thanksgiving. Last night it was here with a parade and twinkling lights all came on and Macy's is going full bore – it's just wonderful. And second I like Thanksgiving because it was simplicity. There are no Thanksgiving gifts, no long list of cards to address and post, no parties – just a time for family, friends, and the unparalleled, unmistakable, utterly gorgeous aroma of a turkey baking in the oven. The third reason, and most important, is gratitude is the central foundation of Christian faith. One of my theological mentors, the late Robert McAfee Brown, a long time theology professor at Union Seminary in New York City, used to say that if the basic Christian message is grace, then the basic human response is gratitude. Grace and gratitude. So I will thank God for my family.

I did something I recommend – I sat down yesterday and wrote down all their names and thought about them – my wife, my five children, their spouses, my thirteen grandchildren and their spouses and partners. And by the end of it my eyes were filled with tears of gratitude. I will be grateful this year for this amazing world, for our nation - even in the midst of its current turmoil and divisiveness. Most of all I will be grateful for God's grace in Jesus Christ. And this year I will add to my list the First Presbyterian Church of Lake Forest and my new friends. Thank you for allowing me to be a part of the life of this wonderful congregation and may God continue to bless you in the days ahead.

Let us pray. Good and gracious God our hearts are full with gratitude this morning – gratitude for all the gifts you have given us, gratitude for the gift of life itself, for this new day, for this precious time together, for this congregation. Now startle us again with your truth and open our hearts to your Word – that hearing we might also believe, and believing trust you with our lives through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Aesop, as you probably remember, was a Greek storyteller who lived 600 years before the common era – before Christ, that is to say. His stories are witty and amusing and contain a moral. They've survived over the years and are familiar to us today. Among the more delightful Aesop stories is the turtle and the hare – that's always a favorite. One of the most memorable I think is Belling the Cat. Here's an abbreviated version of

Belling the Cat: The mice once called a meeting to decide on a plan to free themselves of their enemy the cat. At least they wished to find some way of knowing when she was coming so they might have time to run away. Indeed something had to be done for they lived in such constant fear that they hardly dare stir from their dens by night or day. Many plans were discussed but none of them were thought good enough. At last a very young mouse got up and said ‘I have a plan that seems very simple, but I know it will be successful. All we have to do is hang a bell around the cat’s neck and when we hear the bell ringing we will know immediately that our enemy is coming.’ All the mice were much surprised that they had not thought of such a plan before. But in the midst of rejoicing over their good fortune an old mouse arose and said, ‘I will say that the plan of the young mouse is very good, but let me ask one question: Who will bell the cat?’

You know, there is a direct relationship between fear and responsibility. Fear paralyzes; fear prevents us from doing what has to be done. It prevents us from taking any risks at all, prevents us from being responsible. In Thomas Friedman’s bestseller, *Hot Flat and Crowded*, he argues that fear of terrorism became an obsession and that we are neglecting to deal with important issues of fossil fuels, renewable energy and climate change – in the process making ourselves less safe than ever. Fear prevents us from doing what has to be done.

After the shooting at the First Baptist Church in Southerland Spring, Texas three weeks ago, there was concern that people might start thinking twice about going to church on Sunday for fear of random acts of violence. Aesop would understand that dynamic. Thanks be to God, Steven Williford who lived across the street from the church jumped up in spite of his fear which he acknowledged he was afraid for himself, his family – jumped up and did what needed to be done. Fear can paralyze and distort. Someone observed that if Michelangelo had been afraid of heights he would have painted the Sistine Chapel floor. It’s the subject of a good story Jesus told one time - a surprising story near the end of his ministry when he was increasingly certain that he would be gone soon and that his disciples would be responsible for the project he had started. The story is Parable of the Talents – a man, owner of an estate – to say a man of some means – was about to go on a journey. He summons his three servants, or slaves, and gives them each a portion of the business to manage in his absence. To the first, as you heard, he gives five talents – that’s a substantial amount of money. The man traded, invested, bought low and sold high, and doubled his money. To the second servant the owner gave two talents and the man does the same thing – invests and doubles his money. Both take obvious and considerable risks. Both exercise management of the resources, stewardship. When the property owner returns from his journey and learns what has happened he praises

them both lavishly and rewards them with more responsibility. He put them in charge of more resources and invites them to enjoy his company of the inner circle.

We come to the third servant – prudent, cautious. He knows his master is a tough business man – he will be not pleased at all if his money is lost in a poor investment. So he digs a hole and buries his money. Now this is not a bad man. Over the years working with Presbyterian Board Trustees I've known quite a few people like this man in fact. Every Board of Trustees I've concluded has at least one – no more, though. He's not a bad man. There's no hint of dishonesty or deceit or fraud. He hadn't done anything wrong. He's not very creative, but he's solid. And when the master returns he produces and presents his well-preserved one talent with pride. 'Here it is Master exactly what you gave me is all here intact. I haven't lost a penny of it.'

And then comes the dramatic turn that I'm sure shocked the disciples, as it shocks me as I read it. Jesus said this prudent solid citizen is actually worthless. And he's treated as harshly as anyone else in the entire Bible. He's stripped of everything he has, thrown out of the household out into the outer darkness where Jesus adds there's gnashing, weeping and wailing. But what in the world do we make of this? New Testament scholar Charles Cousar says the message here is stewardship – responsible management of one's own resources, one's one and only life and faith, one's deepest, strongest commitments. The problem here, he says, is prudence and wariness becomes self protected-ness and restraint. Inhibition turns to fear. The man deems it better to preserve his own safety and security and to run the risk of losing money and angering the Master.

New Testament scholar a generation ago, Edward Switzer in his classic commentary wrote, "This parable is aimed at those devoted to their own personal safety." Obsessing about safety, concerned only with security is no way to follow me, Jesus is saying, and it's not way to live your life – holding back, avoiding risks, living in a constant state of fear and anxiety of what might happen. The teller of this story – Jesus himself – knows about risk taking, knows that love always entails risk. Love is risky business, always.

C.S. Lewis in his book *Before Love* said that beautifully. He wrote, "To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrong and possibly broken." If you want to be sure of keeping it intact you must give your heart to no one – not even an animal. Wrap it carefully around with hobbies and little luxuries to avoid all entanglements, wrap it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket – safe, dark, motionless, airless – it will change. It will not be broken, it will become unbreakable. The alternative to tragedy, or at least the risk of tragedy is

damnation,” Lewis said. “The only place outside of heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers of love is hell.”

What, after all, is more risky than marriage? Every time I stood in front of a bride and groom and heard their vows - and I’ve stood in front of a few over the years – I thought about the risks this act inherently entails. ‘As long as we both shall live’ they say. Talk about risky business. What could be more risky than having children? Investing eighteen, nineteen, twenty more years without any guarantee about how it’s going to turn out? What could be more risky than running for office, putting yourself out there investing your time, energy, resources, your faith with the distinct possibility of failure and heart break.

The late William Sloane Coffin wrote a book *The Courage to Love* and suggested that paralyzing fear is in fact a central problem of the church. Coffin himself was a risk taker and invested himself totally in controversial, risky issues – going to jail for them, racial justice, gender justice, war, peace. He wrote what feels like to me an autobiography and is also a good commentary on the text this morning. He wrote, “While love seeks truth fear seeks safety and fear distorts the truth not by exaggerating the ills of the world but by underestimating our ability to deal with them. You can’t lose money if you don’t place any bets. You can’t fall out of bed if you sleep on the floor.” The challenge of responsibility is on the very first page of the Bible. God creates a man and woman and places them in a garden paradise and gives them dominion, which is to say a responsibility for the management of the place. They are supposed to name the plants and animals and become responsible for the whole project. And on the second page of the Bible the original human failure – original sin, which has nothing to do with sex by the way. The original human failure, the original sin is the clear, abject abdication of responsibility. The snake persuades Eve to eat the forbidden fruit; Eve persuades Adam, and when they are caught Adam of course blames Eve ‘she made me do it’ and Eve blames the snake. No one is responsible.

I apologize ahead of time, but every time I hear that story I can’t help but think about Flip Wilson – do you remember Flip Wilson? He had a weekly comedy show on television years ago that I thought was very funny. I loved it! It was not politically correct. One of the great moments in each show was when Wilson cross-dressed as Geraldine, tottering on very high heels wearing a tight short dress, lots of cheap jewelry, heavily made up, flamboyant, totally unconcerned about convention or conventional morality - did something outrageous and then got caught, and then looked into the camera with a twinkle in his eyes and said, “The devil made me do it.” Well the

audience loved it. I always laughed but underneath actually is an entirely biblical analysis of the human condition. God has placed us here to be responsible managers but we abdicate responsibility and when things go wrong, as they inevitably do, we blame someone else. The issues after all are critical. Some say the most critical is the environment – climate change, global warming, rising sea levels. Scientists are virtually unanimous. Human consumption, dependence on fossil fuels are an important factor – perhaps the most important factor by far is the degradation of the environment and global warming which endangers future generations – my grandchildren and yours. Still we refuse to be responsible to do what we need to do.

A Roman Catholic theologian who thinks a lot about the theological implications of our relationship to the earth our home, the garden in which God has placed us and for which God gives us responsibility said recently, “We live in a carefully protected and continually reinforced collective delusion that it isn’t really happening and if it’s happening, it’s not our fault. The killing of twenty-six people at worship at the First Baptist Church in Southerland Springs was the 307th mass killing. The statistics are clear and staggering. The United States stands alone on developed countries – we have the highest rate of gun ownership – more than 300,000,000 guns – roughly one for every citizen. And, we stand alone in the death rate by guns. No one is even close. A few weeks before Southerland Springs, in Las Vegas Stephen Paddock was able to assemble a veritable arsenal of semi-automatic rifles manufactured not for hunting or for target practice, but for killing as many people as efficiently and as quickly as possible. His weapons were efficient. He killed 58 people, wounded 100s more and we’ve already pretty much forgotten about it.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that the sin of respectable people is avoiding responsibility. Bonhoeffer’s academic career and life were cut short when he assumed personal responsibility for what was happening in his beloved nation of Germany in the 1930s. He returned home from New York City, joined the resistance, and was arrested and executed. Bonhoeffer’s major academic work was the big, classic volume on ethics. At the heart of his theological ethic is personal responsibility. Bonhoeffer concluded that to believe in Jesus is to become a responsible citizen of your community, your state, your nation, and ultimately a responsible citizen of the world.

In the book I mentioned earlier *Hot Flat and Crowded* Thomas Friedman tells the other side of the story and writes about the surprising and wonderful idealism of America’s young people – their eagerness to be enlisted in some great project – some on to nation building not only in Afghanistan and Iraq, but nation building here in the United States

of America to restore and revitalize something they cherish, but feel as being degraded. Friedman recalls a tour of Iraq in the midst of some of the fiercest fighting guided by Admiral William Fallon, Chief of the Central Command at the time. They visited an American field hospital in Balad in central Iraq. Friedman remembers the full madness that was Iraq was on display. US soldiers with shrapnel wounds from suicide bombers, insurgents with gunshot wounds to the stomach, a bandaged two month old baby girl with wounds from an insurgent planted IED. Admiral Fallon chatted with the hospital staff who were there on overlapping rotations – 30 days, 60 days, 100 days – he asked how in the world did they manage it all. A voice from the back – a nurse – piped up: We're on all on the same team, Sir. Friedman concludes: I looked around the room. I saw African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, Caucasian Americans – the whole melting pot that is America working together. Half were women, including mothers who left behind families and kids for six months or a year to serve in Iraq. "I walked away shaking my head," he says, "thinking 'what have we done to deserve such good people.'"

I've seen it, too – and so have you. Not in Iraq, but here in this community, in Chicago as young people volunteer to tutor a youngster, build a house for Habitat for Humanity, give their entire vacation to travel to Central America to dig wells – it is so good, and so hopeful it moves me deeply every time I see it. God has made us responsible for creation for God's world, for life on the world – for every living thing in the world. God has made us responsible for human society for its institutions, for this nation, for this community, this church. John Calvin said, "Let this therefore be our rule for generosity and beneficence. We are stewards of everything."

God made us responsible primarily and finally for our own eyes. You may not feel like it every day, but you in fact are in charge. You are responsible for how you live your one and only precious life, how you invest the precious resource that is your life: what you will pour it out for, what you will give it to, what you will love passionately. Christ calls you to live that life passionately, responsibly, fully - taking the inevitable risks of love.

Before he died Bill Coffin wrote, "Will we be scared to death or brought to life it all depends on where we find our ultimate security. Will it be in our own fear and guilt or in God Almighty? If it's held to be guilty it's certainly scarier to be responsible able to respond to God's visionary creative love. In Jesus Christ God came to be among us – became human, became vulnerable; took the risk that human beings would not notice, would not care, would not reject and crucify him. Jesus himself was the ultimate risk taker putting the whole project in the hands of the twelve, and now in your hands and

mine making it our responsibility, and at the end of the day our greatest privilege and our deepest joy. Well done good and faithful servant, he says. You've been faithful in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things. Enter into the joy of your Master. Thanks be to God. Amen.