

## WHAT ARE WE BURYING? (Matthew 25:14-30)

For all you Nervous Nellies out there, here's a comforting fact: you are in just about as safe a place as you can find. It doesn't get much safer than church.

If you had stayed home this morning, you would be in the most dangerous place of all. Seventeen percent of fatal accidents occur at home. Riding in a car, plane, or boat isn't much safer; that accounts for 16% of fatal accidents. Even walking is dangerous; 14% of fatal accidents involve pedestrians.

Church is at the very bottom of the list. A miniscule 0.0001% of all deaths occur during worship. That's 1 in every 100,000. So if you want to play it safe, go to church. The odds of dying in church between 10-11 on Sunday morning are really small. (That's not to say church is completely safe. I filed my first worker's compensation claim a few years ago after walking into the closet door in Fellowship Hall and splitting my head open. But that was Wednesday night and it was dark, so it really doesn't count. In case you wondered, though, that's why we now have a nightlight in the hall.)

All in all, church is a pretty safe place to be. Maybe you want to pitch that to your friends as a reason for going to church.

The human brain is apparently hard-wired to avoid risk. And that's a good thing at one level. Taking risks is, well, risky. And ignoring risks is not a very good survival strategy. Our cave dwelling ancestors had to be careful. The foolhardy ones got eaten by a saber-tooth cat and didn't live to pass the risk-taking gene on to next generation. It was the cautious ones who survived and reproduced.

(I know studies show that individual brains develop as we age and that we become more risk averse as we get older. Youth take bigger risks than we old fogeys. But even they have to balance risk taking with caution.)

Now I haven't seen any saber-tooth cats prowling around the church. But there's no denying the fact that we're the product of an evolutionary process – the descendants of thousands of generations of risk avoiders.

And sometimes act as if there are still deadly predators lurking around every corner just waiting to pounce.

Let's change the analogy from saber-tooth cats to the fellow who was trying to sell a bus to a church. He pointed out all the features that made it just right for church: it had three steering wheels, one gas pedal, and eight sets of brakes.

That was a cartoon in a denominational newsletter. But there's some truth to it. It's a rare church where there aren't more people who want to hit brakes and play it safe than there are people who want to hit the gas and move ahead.

Jesus' parable of the talents is all about taking risks. Who gets rewarded? Not the slave who plays it safe and buries his talent. He comes to a bad end. No, the ones who get rewarded are the ones who take chances, who buy dot-com stocks and pork-belly futures.

I'm not suggesting that West Parish Church go that route, at least not with our investments. There are prudent investor principals that ought to govern what we do with our investments.

But we can't play it safe all the time. We have to take a few risks. We have to try new things. If they work, great, let's build on them. If they don't work, then let's regroup and try something else.

Successful businesses know that. Peter Drucker, the business consultant guru, says there are four kinds of risk:

- Risks we have to accept
- Risks we can afford to take
- Risks we can't afford to take
- Risks we can't afford not to take

Of those four categories, there's only one we should avoid. But it's the last two categories that are most interesting.

All too often we ask the wrong question. We ask: "Can we afford to take this risk?" when we should be asking: "Can we afford NOT to take this risk?"

It's usually easy to find reasons not to take a risk. It's easy to find reasons not to try something new. Nobody likes to fail. But the only way to never fail is to never try anything for the first time.

In the business world, the businesses that have most the successes also have the most failures. They take the most risks and make the most mistakes. But their successes far outweigh their failures. They take risks, make mistakes, learn from their failures, and then start the process all over again.

It's no different for the church. Hudson Taylor, who founded the China Inland Mission in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, said, "Unless there is an element of risk in our exploits for God, there is no need for faith."

Last Sunday Denny described a risk that Governing Board believes the church needs to take, a risk that perhaps we can't afford NOT to take. "Risk" may be putting it too strongly. All we've decided at this point is to sign up for a program the Mass Conference of the UCC is sponsoring and promoting. It's called *Crossroads Massachusetts*. It's not going to tell us what to do. The description of the program says it

- Gives leaders confidence in charting a new course
- Teaches skills for navigating change
- Helps avoid chasing the wrong strategy, and
- Builds congregation-wide excitement for something new

If there's any risk, it comes at the end of the process when it's time to make some bold decisions about what God is calling us to be and to do, and then when we begin to implement the decision we make.

Getting into this program is a way of acknowledging that we can't just ask, "Well, what did we do last year?" and then try to repeat the past into future year after year. Granted, that may be safe. It feels familiar and comfortable. But does it work? And more important, is it faithful?

The world has changed around us. Old assumptions don't work. Albert Einstein said, "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and

expecting different results.” I would hope that we’re not insane here at West Parish.

Have we kept up with the changes?

Jack Welsh, the former CEO of GE “always believed that when the rate of change inside an institution becomes slower than the rate of change outside, the end is in sight.”

Jesus’ parable of the talents tells us that when God reigns in our lives, we not only will take chances but that we have to take chances to claim the fullness of God’s promises. If we become so prudent, so cautious, so careful that we never take a risk, we’re like the slave who buried his talent...and lost his future.

One last story.

A church in Texas was struggling to figure out how it was going to come up with the money to meet its mission pledge. One elder suggested, “What we need is for someone to die and give us a really big gift.” To which another elder replied, “Somebody already did.”

If we really believe that Jesus died for us, shouldn’t we be willing to risk something in return?