

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
“NOTHING VENTURED, NOTHING GAINED”
Matthew 25:14-30
November 16, 2008
11:00 AM Service**

The need for action, even at the risk of failure, is stressed in a thousand proverbs. **“Nothing ventured, nothing gained.” “Better to wear out than to rust out.” “When the going gets tough, the tough get going.” “It is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.”** Such is the grandeur and misery of human responsibility.

As strange as it sounds, life’s joys are directly related to life’s risks. Those who play it safe never get very far in life. There is no greater risk or greater joy than giving ourselves in love or spending ourselves for justice and peace.

The risks involved in making a decision or taking an action are often used by God to build character in us. This is true both when we succeed and when we fail. It takes both faith and courage to decide or to act. We must be willing to risk failure in order to do good.

In 1952 Norman Vincent Peale, pastor of Marble Collegiate Church in New York City, wrote ***The Power of Positive Thinking***. Millions of copies were sold and it became a perennial bestseller. It brought Peale both fame and heartache. He was accused of substituting **“Pealism”** for orthodox Christianity, and of propagating a Pollyanna folk religion built on the idea that thinking makes it so. His defenders claim he was simply calling for the abandonment of negative thinking and the elimination of fear. At any rate, it seems fair to suggest that the test of positive thinking is primarily in whether it leads to positive action.

There are many things that happen to us in life over which we have no control. As Rabbi Kushner reminds us, **“Bad things happen to good people.”** Every single one of us can provide an impressive list of the bad things that have happened to us. But the matter of greatest importance is not what happens to you, but what happens to what happens to you. Just keep in mind; we have little or no control over many of the things that happen to us. We have a measure of control, however, over how we respond to what happens to us.

The word **“responsibility”** affirms that we have *response ability*, the ability to respond. What happens to us may not be as important as what we do about it, or how we react to it. We have all witnessed different people responding to the same event in different ways. The difference lies within them, in their perspectives. **“Two men look out through the same bars:/One sees the mud, and one the stars.”**

When we are paralyzed or broken by some unanticipated and unfortunate turn of events we need a friend to tell our troubles to. This is very important. The unexpressed hurt is very difficult to heal. The true friend, however, may be the one who listens carefully and caringly, then finally says, **“I am so sorry this has happened. Now, what are you going to do about it?”** What happens to what happens to you?

Today’s Gospel lesson gives us a clear example of this. Jesus tells a story about a wealthy man who is about to take an extended journey. He divided his wealth among three servants. A **“talent”** was the equivalent of fifteen years’ wages for a laborer. The master gave one servant five talents, another two talents, and another one talent, **“to each according to his ability.”** Then the master went on his journey. When he returned he called the servants together for an accounting of what they had done with his money.

The first made a glowing report. He had doubled the amount of money his master had entrusted to him. The second did the same; doubling the amount of money he was given. These two received an elaborate commendation: **“Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things. Enter into the joy of your master.”** The third servant made a very conservative report. He had not lost any of his master’s money, but had buried what he was given in order to keep it safe. He had observed the master’s

aggressiveness in increasing his wealth and was afraid to risk any of what was entrusted to him. He received the harshest condemnation imaginable. He was cast into ***“the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”***

Jesus is serious about stewardship. Doesn't the parable indicate that the most important thing in our lives is what we do with what we've been given? ***What*** we are given, according to the parable, is not as important as what we do with it. This is why judgment in terms of stewardship is so utterly fair. We are not accountable for what we have not been given. Jesus says we have the ability to respond positively to the bad things we experience as well as to the good, and we are responsible for doing so.

Perhaps the greatest power we possess is in our ability to respond positively to what life hands us. In a sense, it is the only power we have. Everyone's lot in life is different. The Creator has given us the power we need to live our individual lives effectively and productively. The artistic genius is held to a different standard than I am. I am held to a different standard than the orphaned and hungry child in Darfur. The reason we are exhorted to ***“judge not”*** is because only God has both the knowledge and the wisdom to pass judgment. We tend to judge by making comparisons, which are never entirely fair. God judges our stewardship, what we have done with what we've been given.

We love the Olympic Games and the competition among the gifted and well-trained athletes of many nations. But the competition is not entirely fair. For fairness, go to the Special Olympics. There you may see a child with Downs Syndrome running as fast as he can toward the finish line. It doesn't matter whether he finishes first or dead last. He is a winner if he does the best he can with what he has. He has demonstrated the incredible power of positive action in being or becoming our best.

You possess a God-given ability to choose your responses, to determine your reactions. The question is, will you? What will happen to what has happened to you?

Sometimes we are so afraid of being infected by the world's evil that we do nothing to make the world a better place. So many of us are waiting for someone else to do what needs to be done. As God's people, however, we ourselves must run the risks of failure and of compromise, if the world is to

be transformed. Daring to attempt the unlikely is the only way of achieving the goals of peace, prosperity, and justice for all. I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.