

"Risking to Move Ahead"

II Corinthians 4:7-11; Matthew 25:14-28

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

February 28, 2016 – 3rd Sunday in Lent – Rev. Ronald Botts

A minister once asked in a worship service, "Does anyone here claim to be perfect?" When there was no response he said, "Well, has anyone ever known someone who was perfect?" At that point an elderly gentleman stood up and said, "I didn't know him, but I've heard of him." The minister asked who it was, and the man replied, "My wife's **first** husband."

If you're like most of us, we live with the realization that we're not perfect—no matter how much we may want to be—and that this basic fact about ourself isn't ever going to change. We're in a culture, however, that seeks to deny this about our human nature. It puts perfection on a pedestal and judges us by how close we meet the mark.

So, naturally, we want to have the perfect body, the perfect skin and hair, the perfect smile. We want to be seen as smart, urbane, witty, a good conversationalist, and sure of ourselves in every situation. In our work we want to be viewed as knowledgeable, efficient, trustworthy, and savvy.

We want to always put names and faces together, remember every birthday and anniversary, keep fully informed about world happenings, and know all the answers on *Jeopardy*. And, of course, it goes without saying that we are capable of setting our digital clocks and programming our remote controls. Successful people are perfect people, or is it the other way around?

We're conditioned to believe this perfection myth. Movie stars and models are almost always a perfect "10" in looks. Our golfing standard is Phil Mickelson or Lexi Thompson. Our homemaker ideal is Martha Stewart. In so many ways we're given the impression in life that unless you're perfect, or close to it, you won't amount to much. Unless you've got everything going right for you, you can't accomplish important things.

Over time we learn to live with our imperfections, but it's hard to shake the idea we're not good enough because we don't measure up to society's standards or even our own. We may try to hide our weaknesses so others won't be aware of them, but that's hard to pull off in the long run.

Denying our limitations may appear the best way to handle them, but those who have done the most with their lives have discovered another way: they have been willing to acknowledge their imperfections right along with their strengths. They have understood something that the apostle Paul also knew when he wrote: "I find that sometimes my weakness becomes strength."

When thinking of the pros and cons of life I'm always reminded of Babe Ruth. While he is known as the outstanding home run hitter of all time, it's interesting that he was also an all-star at striking out. During all his years of playing Ruth either led the majors in strike outs or was near the top of the list each season.

The frustration of going down swinging might have unnerved others, but Ruth didn't let this bother him. He admitted, even joked about his batting problem. It's good that he did. He knew his weakness and could have just stood there with the bat on his shoulder, immobilized, but he said in essence, "I'll risk it." There was something else he knew, too: if he made contact, he could hit the ball a heck of a long way.

I don't know of anybody wanting to move ahead in life who doesn't have to take some risks. Jesus speaks about this very situation in the Parable of the Three Servants. You recall that the man who was given the least was also the only one who was afraid to risk losing what he had. So, therefore, his idea of responsible stewardship was to bury the money so that it could be returned intact. He wanted to take no chance of losing it.

When he returns, the master in the parable scolds this fellow for not doing anything with what had been entrusted to him. If all the employer wanted to get back was what he left, he could have buried the money in the ground himself. The point was that he expected a gain from his money while it was in this steward's possession.

All of the servants had the capacity to make something out of what had been given them. Two of them did what they needed to do, and so fulfilled their potential and then received their master's praise; one didn't, and he was called to task. It would have been better to try and fail, than do nothing at all. These three men had authority for conducting various aspects of the master's business. They all knew that growth of the funds was the objective of their job.

Jesus' parable was probably directed toward the religious leaders of Israel. They had failed to fulfill their mission to be a light to the other nations. Jesus was especially critical of those who were content to sit on their faith rather than to bring it dynamically to the people around them. Much had been entrusted to them and, therefore, much was expected from them.

We may not be the parable's intended hearers, but I believe there's a message in the story for us as well. Here's what I see. If God is like the master in the parable, then we are like the servants. The Lord entrusts us with gifts of various kinds—talents, physical abilities, intelligence, whatever—and gives them to us in anticipation of our doing something with them. They are to be used and not simply conserved. God prods and encourages us to make the most of ourselves, holding us accountable for what we do, or fail to do, with our lives.

Sometimes great gifts also come amid great limitations. Consider Helen Keller, blind and deaf, but who left us a veritable treasure of thought and inspiration in her writings. Of all people she certainly had an excuse not to attempt anything, but that wasn't how she approached life. If she thought she had to be perfect, or waited until she might become fully functional, she never would have left us a single word.

We don't need noted persons to illustrate this for us. We see examples of this all the time in the people around us. Our families and friends are often our best models. Every person here could name someone who serves as an inspiration for a life fully and well lived. More often than not, these successful people in our eyes also had challenges as well.

There are three truths at work here. First, you have to take yourself as you are, for the strengths and weaknesses you have. Second, you can't move ahead unless you are willing

to exert some effort. And finally, you have to be ready to take risks at the right times if your intention is to gain or grow. So... accept yourself, apply yourself, venture yourself.

There was once a fellow who went into business, but that pretty much turned out to be a failure. Despite this setback he knew he had some abilities. So he decided to run for the state legislature, and lost. Some told him he was a fool and advised him to lower his sights. Another turn at business proved to be equally unsuccessful.

Still determined, he ran for the state legislature once again, only this time he surprised many by winning. Once seated he attempted to become the Speaker of the House, but was defeated in his efforts. He then ran for Congress but, of course, he lost. Once more he tried and this time was successful, but when his term was up he lost his bid for re-election.

He next ran for the U.S. Senate and was defeated. He tried for the Senate again and, you guessed it, he lost again. If ever there was a person who could have given up in his efforts to move ahead, this was the fellow.

This man didn't let his limitations and his defeats stop him, however, for he knew that he had strengths which he could build upon. He was a man of faith and strong character, and truly believed he could serve God by serving others. So, utterly foolish as it may have seemed to many, he tried yet again for political office. Despite his many set-backs and disappointments, he was determined to run once more. So, how did he fare this time? If you take a five dollar bill out of your pocket, you'll see how this fellow finally did.

A simple prayer goes this way: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

This parable of Jesus asks what we intend to do with the investment that God has made in us. Christ says whatever we make of ourselves, fulfilling as that may be, we also do it as a way of thanking and glorifying God. It starts with our willingness to make the effort, utilizes both our strengths and weaknesses, and proceeds from understanding that no gain comes without some risk.

What applies to us individually also applies to us collectively as the church. Faith communities have to be willing to take some risks as well if they are to move ahead. If we act like the over-prudent steward of our parable we will squander the assets we hold in trust. We will have nothing to show someday for what we've been given. The whole idea is to produce more than what we receive, to give back greater than what we've been given.

So whether it's you or me or the church, we're called on to make a responsible investment of our time, talents, and treasure. We are not to be conservators, but investors in life. In this teaching story today Jesus reminds us of his expectation of our stepping out in faith. Importantly, he promises us his presence and help whenever we take the risk of living up to our potential.