

Essentialism: Making a Choice

*A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on November 19, 2017
on Matthew 25:14-30 at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

You might think your eyes are playing tricks on you if you were to wander over to a big ole' farm in Louisburg and see Jason Brown tending the crops. Jason doesn't exactly fit the profile of a rural North Carolina farmer, you see. Because just a few years ago, Jason was a multi-million dollar earner in the NFL, anchoring the offensive line of the St. Louis Rams and enjoying all the spoils that come with such a career. But at one point rather abruptly, Jason decided that the glitz and glamour and glory of pro football just wasn't worth it, and up and walked away. "You're making the biggest mistake of your life!," his agent said. It's the NFL! And a \$37 million dollar contract! Why in the world would someone do that, you might wonder — and you'd not be the only one!

Because unlike his counterparts who maybe quit one professional sport to play another, or to enter into lucrative partnerships in advertising, Jason left the NFL to open a farm. Called the First Fruits Farm to be exact, Jason's haul goes first to feed the hungry through food pantries. His inaugural harvest was 100,000 pounds of sweet potatoes, grown simply to give it away. "I've never felt more successful," Jason says. More successful than in the NFL?! Well, yeah, that was great. "But when I think about a life

of greatness, I think about a life of service... [because] love is the most wonderful currency you can give anyone."¹

This story of Jason Brown planting sweet potatoes that become the currency of love might sound downright strange to some of us. Saying no to cash to say yes to crops is practically unheard of! Instead, we might find ourselves nodding along in agreement more with the story Jesus tells in today's gospel reading — of talents and investments, fear and faith. For there was a master who summoned his slaves before leaving town — one got five talents, one two, and another one. The first two slaves took their talents and invested them, effectively doubling the master's money and receiving his high praise. But the third was afraid and planted it safely in the ground where he could be sure to return it to the master. Instead of praising him for a decision sure to preserve the master's money, the master condemned the slave for embedding his abundance, and cast him out, as the writer of Matthew says, "into outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." So much for buried treasure!

If you're like me, you probably hear all this talk of 'talents' and quickly let your mind wander right over into metaphor, to talents like painting, cycling, caregiving, organizing, you name it. But in order to grasp the full significance of the parable, we should remember that a 'talent' was the denomination of money equal to twenty years' worth of the

¹ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/former-nfl-player-farms-for-good/>, with thanks to dear friend Rev. Courtney Allen for the share!

average salary. To put into today's dollars, the average American's salary hovers around \$50,000 annually; therefore, one talent would be worth one million dollars! So who can blame that poor servant for wanting to play it safe with such a sum! You might even say the other two servants were far too reckless with their millions, taking the master's money and playing the proverbial markets in which they could have lost it all!²

Beyond these challenges in the parable, we could also easily start to think that God is just like the master, a free-market capitalist to the extreme who privileges those who have and banishes those who have not. We might assume God approves of this master/slave relationship, that the exploitation of labor on the backs of those with less is just how these things should be done. Like the master, we think God to be disengaged from day to day living, dropping a bunch of resources in the laps of slaves and then expecting them to do the dirty work. We could wonder if God was indeed "a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed," as described by the third slave. In these scenarios, power is wielded for profit, and profit is always more important than people. So what, then, are we to glean from today's gospel to inform our living? How might it help us when faced with choices of ultimate significance?

² Paul N. Anderson, "Matthew 25:14-30," *Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew*, vol. 2, p265.

Because the world in which we live sounds too similar — the haves who have more, the have nots who struggle with less, the powerful who relish control, the powerless admonished by authorities. In such a world, the choices we make are often motivated by fear of such a reality. But unlike the world in which we live, these are simply not the sounds of the kingdom that Jesus proclaims. And unlike the master who admonishes his slave, that is not the tone of the God that Jesus tells us about. That's not the God who has special care for the last and the least. That's not the God who sends Jesus to bring good news to **the poor**. That's not the God who, in Jesus, whose life of risk nailed him to a cross, but whose everlasting reward invited all of human history to meet him in the mouth of an empty tomb.

Because, you see, if we know that the essence of God is that of love, the essence of the parable here is about the choice to live! To do something bold with what we have been given. To not be paralyzed by the fear of what could happen that we miss the joy of what could be. To risk something big for something good.

I cannot think of a more timely lesson for us to consider, dear church, than this one. Faced with all that lies ahead, it would be so easy for us to dig a hole and bury our treasure in it. Need to do millions of dollars of restoration, renovation, reduction, and reimagination of our church house? Time to circle the wagons and hunker down. Need to reframe and refresh our dream of ministry in light of a major change in

facilities, a new articulation of our shared mission and vision, an ending of one of our signature ministries, and a dynamically-changing context in which to do it? Time to rally the troops, put our heads down, and just get through it. Need to do all of this before the roof starts leaking again, or the market crashes, or the parking across the street goes away, or we start disagreeing on things? Time to get out the tarps and rain gear, throw down the anchor, and brace ourselves for the sure storms to come. Taking what we have and stashing it where we can watch over it, protect it, and keep it safe just sounds like good sense to me! Risk what we've got? That's for the foolish. Bury our talents? Sounds more like it!

But you and I both know that's not the end of the story. Because if you joined in our recent sessions on mission and vision, you likely remember that a long-standing value of this church is that of innovation. Whether it was the first gym in downtown, the first racially-integrated educational space in Forsyth County, or the key incubator and launcher of churches, nonprofits, and organizations, First Baptist Church on Fifth has long been proud of our creativity in doing ministry here in Winston-Salem. But as you know, innovation demands risk. It was risky to spend thousands of dollars and square footage on a gym back in the 1960s, risky to pour start-up energy into the work of our Children's Center, Crisis Control, Habitat for Humanity, Samaritan Ministries, Knollwood Baptist Church, and the Winston-Salem Center for Education and the Arts. And it's risky

today to look deeply at our capacity for ministry and right-size our space and scope in order to do the most good.

I think that's why several of you then reflected on our assets last Sunday by saying that key among them is our "willingness to take risks." Another of you called us a church with "a legacy of action." These comments called to mind for me that great quote from Apple founder Steve Jobs, who said "innovation is not about saying yes to everything. It's about saying NO to all but the most crucial features."³ **First Baptist, I see in you a people who when faced with a choice between fear of the reality or faith in the risk, we have chosen the risk!**

"The greatest risk of all, it turns out," says pastor John Buchanan, "is not to risk anything, not to care deeply and profoundly enough about anything to invest deeply, to give your heart away and in the process risk everything. The greatest risk of all, it turns out, is to play it safe, to live cautiously and prudently."⁴ So might we then carry forth our legacy of innovation and risk into a hopeful future ahead? Might then we enter into this season of our church's life, ready leave it all on the proverbial field, even a field full of sweet potatoes? Might we have faith in the risk instead of fear in the reality?

³ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/683503-innovation-is-not-about-saying-yes-to-everything-it-s-about>

⁴ John Buchanan, "Matthew 25:14-30," *Feasting on the Gospels: Year A, Volume 4*, p310.

I've told you before the story of the late Donald Coggan, who served as the former Archbishop of Canterbury. He was traveling by train through the English countryside once, when a young seminary student recognized him and quickly was starstruck. She summoned up her courage to introduce himself to the archbishop, and they began a meaningful conversation that lasted for some time. Their conversation was far-ranging, everything from life to ministry to the intersection of the two, and that young seminarian was eagerly soaking in all that she could. She could hardly believe their time together was coming to a close as the train approached the station, but quickly turned to him to express her gratitude for the conversation. "Dr. Coggan," she began, "thank you!. This was such a thrill to me. Take care!" And with a knowing smile on his face, Dr. Coggan responded, "my dear, not take care. Take risk!"⁵

With that same spirit, the late great preacher William Sloane Coffin concluded worship each week with this benediction:

*May God give you the grace never to sell yourself short;
grace to risk something big for something good;
grace to remember that the world is too dangerous
for anything but truth and too small for anything but love.*⁶

Amen!

⁵ Story told to me by dear friend, Rev. Alan Sherouse.

⁶ Coffin's benediction is quoted in a variety of places, this being one of them: <https://www.baptiststandard.com/opinion/editorials/editorial-risk-something-big-for-something-good/>