

Don't hold back
Matthew 25:14-30
April 20, 2008

Don't hold back! Take it all the way! Live life to its fullest! Don't be afraid to take risks!

When I think of a person not afraid to take risks, I think of Tyler Greene. Tyler thinks in terms of what he can do, not in terms of what he can't do. He thinks in terms of abilities, not in terms of disabilities. He thinks about what he can do, and even about what he might just be able to do if he tries! I am sure Tyler does come up against things he cannot do -- like we all do! -- but he is always trying new things, always pushing the envelope.

Some of you have heard me, or Tyler, tell this story before, but it is worth telling again! Tyler was a member of our West Virginia mission team two years ago. During our time in West Virginia, we took a whitewater rafting trip down the New River gorge. Tyler sat in the middle of the raft, yelling with delight with the rest of us as we negotiated the rapids. He especially enjoyed the times we stopped to "play" in holes, hydraulic features that suck the raft in and fill it with water and threaten to flip it.

After we had passed the rapids we came to a large boulder at the river's edge our guides called the "Jump Rock." Rafters climbed up the steep face of the boulder then one by one jumped into the water off a sheer 12-15' drop on the other side.

I was sure Tyler would wait in the raft while the rest of us jumped, but he wanted to do it! His dad helped him climb the rock and then he waited on top while I jumped into the water ahead of him. As Tyler puts it, two things got him off the rock: the push with which his father launched him and his pastor down in the water praying for him! Tyler soared through the air and landed with a perfect back flop -- smack! I thought: "Oh, no! Is he OK?" After several anxious moments -- for me! -- Tyler raised his head from the water with a scream of joy.

When I think of a person ready to take risks, I think of Connie Jo Peirce. You would not have known it as she spoke from the lectern last Sunday, but she is very nervous -- very nervous! -- about getting up and talking in front of people, especially in front of all you terrifying people! Didn't she do a great job as worship leader? Didn't she express herself confidently and sincerely? Good things happen when you are willing to take risks, to venture out of your comfort zones. Good things happen that benefit you and bless the people around you.

My wife, Lynne, ventured out of her comfort zone ... all the way into another time zone! She graduated with a senior class of twenty-eight students in Cedarville, a small town in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Almost no one among her peers ever left town, not to say, the state, but Lynne went all the way to northeast Massachusetts to go to college, at least in part because a certain young man lived in that part of the country. And look what she got!

June Settle is a risk-taker. She married at sixteen and stayed married to the same man for fifty years. She lived all over the world, following him to all the places his military career took him. She never lived in the same house very long. She made us play silly games and made the ladies of our Day Circle dress up in toilet paper hats of their own making!

But she especially took risks by putting herself “out there” emotionally and spiritually, telling us what she was really feeling and thinking. We loved her for it and she brought much joy into our lives, even as hers was often filled with pain, physical and emotional pain.

I do not know much of Carol Montag’s personal history, but I do know her music, and I cannot imagine she has achieved the level of success she has in her performing career or the kind of rapport she has with her audiences, the kind of ministry she has, without taking risks. Writing songs is risky business, especially the way Carol does it, putting real ideas, real feelings, personal stories -- herself -- into her music. And she surely knows, as I do, that every time you put yourself in front of people, to sing a song or to preach a sermon, you take a great risk.

But consider the alternative! A world without music. A world without witness to the extraordinary gospel of Jesus Christ. A world without ... whatever it is that you have to offer to the rest of us!

So don’t hold back! Put yourself out there! Carpe diem! Seize the day!

But you know that. You don’t need me to tell you that. We know it. We know that life is sweeter when we really live it! We know it even if we don’t always do it, even if we sometimes close down and hold back and play it safe.

You don’t need me to tell you that, and you don’t need Jesus to tell you that. You don’t need Jesus to tell you that burying your head -- or your talents -- in the sand is a bad idea. If the story of the three servants was merely an example story, if it was merely a contrived tale with a moral punchline, then maybe we could do without it. But it is neither of those things. It is a parable, a parable about the kingdom of heaven. “At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like this ...”

“At that time ...”

At what time? At the time of the coming of the Son of Man. At the time of the fruition of the kingdom of God. At the time when God will come to set things right and make all things new. At the time when people will weep for joy because the day they have waited for, the world they have prayed for, is here at last!

The whole of chapters 24-25 of Matthew is filled with Jesus’ counsel and Jesus’ stories and Jesus’ parables about that time. He cautions his followers that they will not know and cannot know when that time will come, but he urges them to be ready, to be prepared for the day when it does come, not to be caught napping, not to grow inattentive or uncaring because it is long in coming.

He urges them to be alert and busy as they wait, and with this parable, the parable of the three servants, he warns them to make good use of what God has given them, so that, at the end of the day, they will have something to show for it.

That is just what the first two servants do. They are not both entrusted with the same amount of money, but they are each entrusted with something, and each of them invest well and make a profit for the master. But the third servant takes the money with which he has been entrusted and buries it.

Why? Why did he bury his master’s money?

He says he was afraid. He thinks of all the things that could go wrong: *What if the money is stolen? What if I make a foolish investment? What if I make a wise investment, but am cheated of my profits? What if ...?*

The third servant is afraid of failure. He is afraid of loss. He is afraid of his master's hard heart. So he comes up with the perfect solution: bury the money! No risk, no loss! This way he can't lose. But this way he does lose -- everything!

Maybe he just said he was afraid. Maybe he was just lazy. Maybe he couldn't be bothered. Maybe he was preoccupied with his own affairs and didn't want to be bothered with worrying about somebody else's money while they were away, so he just decided to put it in a safe place and forget about it.

Who knows? But it doesn't matter why he didn't put the money to good use. It only matters that he didn't. It only matters that he did nothing. He hid his light under a bushel basket! He buried his treasure in the ground!

This parable seems to me the antithesis of the parable of the hidden treasure. In that parable a man finds treasure buried in a field, and it changes his life. He sells everything he has to buy that field, to have that treasure. He lets go of everything else and holds nothing back.

But in this parable, a man doesn't dig up a treasure, he buries it, and finding, having, holding that treasure changes nothing, absolutely nothing, about his life. He lets go of nothing. He holds back everything. He puts the treasure away so he can get on with his life as it is, without bother, without risk.

What might we do if we were willing to take greater risks with what we have? What might we do as a church if we were willing to take greater risks with what we have been given? That's the question I posed to the members of our Wednesday night Bible study group when we discussed this parable. Here is a sampling of their responses:

- start an after-school program
- expand our neighborhood ministries
- start a ministry with homeless people or use the church as a homeless shelter
- make contact with needy people, with poor people, where they are, going to them instead of expecting them to come to us
- be truly and fully accepting of all people
- freely communicate our joy, freely evangelize

Someone said: *Take all our money and give it away to the less fortunate wherever they are ...* But that is just too far out there! Isn't it?

What might we do if we were willing to take greater risks with what we have, if we were willing to put ourselves out there, if we were willing to stop holding back, stop playing it safe? Well, what do we have? What have we been given?

We have considerable financial resources. We have a sizable endowment, and we have not held it back! I think we have dispersed as much money from the endowment fund over the years as has been given to the endowment fund! Our endowment has been put to good use, for the sake of the church and for the sake of the kingdom of God.

We have a fine facility, and we have not held it back! We do not just keep it for ourselves and our own use, but we open it to Alanon and Alateen and AMI, the Alliance for the Mentally Ill, and we host the Grin & Grow childcare program. There were those, you know, who thought we shouldn't, those who thought having kids running all over the church was much too great a risk, but we did it, we took that risk! We are putting our facility to good use for the sake of children and families, for the sake of the kingdom of God.

We have abundant people resources, resources of time and resources of talent, and many of you are putting those resources to good use, often in ways few of the rest of us are aware of, for the sake of this community and for the sake of the kingdom of God.

But our most precious resource, our greatest treasure, is the kingdom itself, and the faith that welcomes us into the kingdom and binds us to Jesus and to each other. What are you doing with your faith? Are you protecting it? Building a wall around it? Burying it? Keeping it out of reach of any threat or any controversy, so when the last of your days arrives, you may pull it out and say: "Here is my faith! Unscratched, untarnished, unused, in mint condition!"?

Or are you putting your faith to good use, not holding back, not keeping it private, not just playing it safe? Has your faith been put through the ringer, put on the spot, put to the test?

Have you taken risks -- will you take risks -- with your faith? Singing songs and praising God loudly? Speaking boldly and openly about the reality of the love of God in your life and in this world? Daring to connect your faith publicly to issues of public concern? Not just saying what you believe, hoping to put yourself in God's good graces, but doing what you believe, hoping to bring others the blessing of God's good graces?

Don't hold back! Put your faith out there! Put your faith on the line! Don't be afraid to take risks! What do you have to lose? Tell me, what of anything that really matters do you have to lose?