

A Sermon Preached at Maple Street Congregational Church, UCC
Danvers, MA
Rev. Kevin M Smith
November 19, 2017
Matthew 25:14-30

Give It a Try

Unbeknownst to me, when I was toiling in my first, rather challenging year at Harvard Divinity School, there was this guy and his friends on the other side of the campus experimenting with a new idea. These undergrads were taking a big risk getting involved in anything but their studies. But, they were using one of the prized cultural practices at Harvard to come up with a new ground-breaking venture—creating and deepening friendships.

Yes, Harvard University, which began as school to produce ministers for congregational churches prizes academics, but they also prize creating a rich social life for its students. That is why new undergraduate students at Harvard are required to live in “houses” on campus. The students and their faculty live-in house mothers and fathers all sleep in the same building, eat together, study together, and have many social events throughout the year. Many of them worship together whether they are Christians, Jews, Muslims, or practicing Buddhists.

One of the ways people on the Harvard Campus, or the other college campuses around town like BU and BC back in my days at the Div School, got to know each other by having picture directory books affectionately known as “Face Books.” Mark Zuckerberg and his campus buddies had the bright idea and a risk-taking nature which, when combined, helped launch one of the most profound life-changing technologies of this modern era—the online Facebook. All this was happening on the other side of the Harvard campus when I had my nose buried in my Bible learning scriptural exegesis or interpretation. Eventually, Zuckerberg and his buddies expanded their online Facebook to other college campuses in Boston and at Stanford University and the rest is online and big money history.

Speaking of a group of people who wanted to band together and get to know each other and live with each other and who took a big risk to do so, we have the pilgrims who started a church we affectionately know as the Congregational Church. We are celebrating one of the things they liked to do most this week—sitting down at the table with one another and sharing a traditional meal. The pilgrims were a people who took a big risk—they risked their lives to leave an oppressive culture that was either keeping them in poverty or stifling their religious freedom. Strangers from all over Britain and the Netherlands hopped on boats together to settle and create communities in what they called the “New World.” I’m not going to glorify this too much because their laudable risk also had its downside, too. We all know what this influx of the Europeans did to the indigenous peoples of this continent. That is the thing about taking risks, and really about living life in general, good and bad things happen to people. While we celebrate

the risks taken by the early Congregationalists, we should also celebrate the risks taken by many native peoples of this land that they took to live off the land sustainably and raise their families close to nature as just one of many of the Great Spirit's creations.

Our Gospel lesson from Matthew this morning was also about people who were willing to take risks. There was a landowner, who was willing to leave his assets in the hands of his employees when he went away. There were at least two of those employees who were willing to take risks to grow the landowner's investment even though they knew him as a hard person. The one who didn't take the risk ended up suffering horrible consequences for not doing so. I've always wondered what would have happened to the third employee if they had invested the money but lost. Would they have at least been rewarded by the landowner for taking the risk? I hope so, but I'm not so sure with that mean and greedy landowner.

The founder of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, once said "The biggest risk is not taking any risk... In a world that is changing really quickly, the only strategy that is guaranteed to fail is *not* taking risks." I think he is right. Still, I wonder if he ever imagined that his invention would one day be used by opponents of this country to threaten our democratic elections? We are finding out more and more how social media has been used to spread disinformation. There are upsides and downsides to every new venture, but that is how we humans progress and grow closer to the ideals we hope will lead to health and well-being for everyone. It's a meandering road not a straight line to success. (https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/m/markzucker453450.html?src=t_taking_risks)

In some sense, every one of us who uses Facebook or other social media tools is taking risks. We are putting our daily activities and pictures out there for the world to see. Many of us are expressing our opinions and casting them out into the internet for everyone to know. I gather that most of us do this because we want to be sociable. We want to share with our friends the fun or important things we are doing and see pictures and videos of us doing it. It's about creating connections. We are all pilgrims taking risks even though we know there are consequences. We take risks to create community and, hopefully, be relevant to our community.

Maple Street Church, its Pilgrim, and later Abolitionist, founders and you, too, today take risks for this social and religious entity we call "the church." If we are going to continue to be relevant to the community "out there," we will need to continue taking risks. Sure, we will fail at times. Sure, we may not always foresee the consequences down the road, but if we do not take risks for building a beloved community, the community will not be around very long. Sheltering ourselves and putting all our energy inward is a sure recipe for fading away in relevance and in numbers.

May we remember this Thanksgiving to celebrate the risk-takers. Without those people who took the risk start Maple Street Church, who also took the risk to advocate for the immediate end of an oppressive treatment of one people against another, this congregation would not exist and we would not be sitting here today.

During this intentional year of openness to God's vision, bring your ideas forward so we can give it a try. Let's take risks together, and if we fail, we will learn something and we will get up and try again and again. God's reign needs people who are willing to try new things and take risks to spread the Good News of God's enduring, forgiving love and work to create a just and health world. Amen.

