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STAYING IN THE RAPIDS
Luke 19:11-27

In his book, *True Religion*, Palmer Chinchin tells about a lesson he learned when he and his brothers took a rafting trip down the Zambezi River in Africa. Here in the US the highest class rapids you can raft are class 5. The Zambezi rapids get up to 7 and 8. Palmer says as he sat on the edge of that raft all geared up with his helmet and life jacket he thought it couldn't be that bad. Then their guide began to instruct them. "When the raft flips over..." Palmer immediately noted that he didn't say, "if" but when. The guide went on, "stay in the rough water. You will be tempted to swim toward the calm water at the edge of the banks. Don't do it. It is in the calm water that the crocs are waiting for you. They are large and hungry. So even when the raft flips stay in the rough water."

Personally I like the calm water in life. Rapids in real life usually aren't that fun. In fact, they are usually turbulent, disorienting and often painful. But is it possible that while we think the danger is in the tumult of the whitewater there is greater danger in the calm water? Could it be that is where the crocodiles await? Today we are going to look at a little story that Jesus told that is related in Luke 19:11-27 that calls on us to stay in the rapids.

THE NOBLE GAVE HIS SERVANTS A TASK

Verse 11 tells us why Jesus came up with the parable we are studying today. He was on his way to Jerusalem, and he was now very close. He was in Jericho, about 15 miles from Jerusalem, a one day hike. This proximity to Jerusalem led to a heightened sense of climax. If a person was to make any sort of mark on the nation of Israel eventually he would have to go to Jerusalem. And if someone claimed to be Messiah who was ushering in a new kingdom, he would have to do it in Jerusalem.

In the end of Luke 18 as Jesus neared Jericho he healed a blind man, an act that caught everyone's attention. In Luke 19:1-10 Jesus had an encounter with Zaccheus, a despised tax collector. Zaccheus had his "come to Jesus" moment and his life, in that instant, changed forever. So Luke tells us in the two episodes preceding the parable Jesus' power over nature and even over sin in people's lives was displayed. He was showing very Messiah-like attributes.

Now look at what happens immediately after the passage we are considering. In verse 28 Luke wrote, “After Jesus had said this he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.” Shortly after he told this story Jesus entered Jerusalem to shouts and praise of the crowd as they cried out, “Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.”

Luke tells us what this was producing. In verse 11 he said everyone expected him to declare his kingship as soon as he got to Jerusalem. He was going to take over, drive the Romans out, and usher in a new age of glory for Israel, an age of power, peace and prosperity for all. Jesus told this story to address those feverish expectations. He was saying, “What you anticipate is not what’s going to happen. Yes, I am the king, and yes, I will bring my kingdom, but not in the way you think and not right now.”

There is an important historical context to this story. Jesus uses the framework of an actual historical event that all Israelis knew about, but reshapes it to serve his purposes. When Herod the Great, who ruled as the Roman’s client king over Palestine, died one of his sons, Archelaus, went to Rome seeking to be given rule over all his father’s territory. This was around 4 B.C. However, prior to that he was responsible for a massacre of as many as 3000 people in Jerusalem. The Jewish people mostly despised and mistrusted him. He was opposed in Rome by his half-brothers and a delegation of 50 Jewish citizens who wanted nothing to do with him. Caesar didn’t give him all he wanted. The territory was divided among him and his brothers and he was named “ethnarch” over Judea.

Now look at the story Jesus told. It is about a man of the aristocracy going away to get himself appointed king. Sound familiar? This seems a bit odd to us. Why would you leave to be appointed king? Ancient Israelis had no difficulty understanding this. Who chose the kings who ruled over the people of Israel? They didn’t elect them or crown them by popular proclamation. Rome decided. If you were going to be king over Judea you had to have Caesar choose you.

Before his trip this noble man calls in 10 of his servants and gives each of them a mina, an ancient coin. This was not an enormous sum, but neither was it coffee money. Estimates are that a mina was worth 3 or 4 months wages for the common man. The average wage in California last year was \$51,000 or \$4250 per month. So if the mina was worth 4 months wages that works out to around \$17,000. It’s not enough to retire, but it’s nothing to sneeze at either.

The king wannabe tells the servants “put the money to work.” The Greek word Luke used is *pragmateuomai*. We get “pragmatic” from it. Jesus was telling them, “be pragmatic with this money.” The English Standard Version translates it “Engage in business with it.” He wanted them to go do something with it.

In verse 14 Jesus says that some of the aristocrat’s subjects “hated him.” They sent a delegation to that far country to tell the central authority there that they wanted no part of this man as their king. There is no mention of this in Matthew’s version of the story. I believe Jesus brought this up in part because it was consistent with the story of Archelaus, but also because it reflected the reality about him. He was the one who was going to go away to receive his kingship and there were people in Israel who despised him and would not tolerate him as their king.

THE KING GAVE APPROPRIATE REWARDS

The nobleman, despite the efforts of his enemies, returned as the new king. When he got home he called his servants in to find out what they had done with the money he gave them. The first one had done well. He had put that \$17,000 to work and turned it into \$170,000! Now I don’t know how long the king was gone, but it was probably a year or two at the most. This guy had a 1000% return on his investment. That’s pretty impressive. I don’t know how you do that legally. I’m concerned that he either he had some sort of Bernie Madoff Ponzi operation going or maybe he connected with some poppy growers in Afghanistan and was dealing illegal drugs, but we don’t know that. All we know is he did awfully well.

The king pats him on the back. “Well done my good servant.” As it turns out this actually was something of a test. The king didn’t need these guys to go make him a lot of money. He already had a lot. What he wanted to do was see what they would do if entrusted with a large sum. This guy showed that he was trustworthy. So the reward was that he would be given a significant role in the king’s regime. He would be assigned 10 cities to rule over. That’s sort of like being appointed Secretary of State or maybe Secretary of Defense. The second guy also was quite successful. He didn’t do quite as well as the first guy, but he earned a 500% return by turning the \$17,000 into a tidy \$85,000. He was likewise rewarded with a big role in the administration, ruling over 5 cities.

Then we get to the third guy. This guy was the football coach whose team is up by 1 with 2 minutes to go and they have the ball on the other team’s 45 yard line, 4th and 1 yard to go. If he tells his team to go for it and they make the first down they can pretty much run out the clock and win the game. He punts. All he can see is the consequence if he doesn’t make it. If we get stuffed on 4th down, he thinks, they

have the ball in great field position. All they have to do is move the ball 25 yards and they're in position to kick a game winning field goal. I'll be called an idiot. He makes the safe play, only to see the opposing team take the final minutes to move the ball down the field and kick a game winning field goal with no time left on the clock. That coach sees only the potential for disaster if he takes a risk.

This guy says in verse 21. "I was afraid of you, because you are a hard man. You take out what you did not put in and reap what you did not sow." The word that is translated "hard man" is the Greek word *austeros*, from which we get the word "austere." It means strict, demanding. One scholar translated it "exacting," and I think that's close. The expression about taking out what he did not put in and reaping what he did not sow I believe is a colloquial way of saying, "I knew you have extremely high expectations and you don't abide failure."

The most important part of this guy's statement was "I was afraid of you." The consequence of failing the king was all this guy could see. He was absolutely sure if he tried to do some business with the king's money and he lost it there would be a terrible price to pay. There's way too much risk involved there. So he punted. He took the coin he'd been given, wrapped it up in a bandana and stuffed it someplace he thought was totally safe. Then when the king returned he handed him his money and said, "There you go. There's your whole mina. I didn't lose a dime of it."

The king was less happy with that decision than the players and the fans of that football coach. He calls the man literally an "evil servant." He says the least he could have done was to put it in a savings account and earned that impressive half a percent interest. So he rewards him as well. He gives him a negative reward. He takes away what little he has and gives it to the other servants. Then he finishes off the rewards ceremony by having his enemies brought in and put to the sword.

IMPLICATIONS

THE KING WILL RETURN

That one statement packs a lot of information. The first thing it tells us is that the King is going to leave. Jesus was warning his followers that what was going to happen in Jerusalem was not what they would expect. It would result in him going to a "distant country." They didn't have a clue what that meant at that point. He told them this story to prepare them for what was going to happen.

The distant country wasn't his death. It referred to his return to the spiritual realm. He remains in that distant country, which really isn't distant at all though it feels a long ways off, to this day. The point of the story is that his servants were going to

have something to do in the time that he was away. That, of course, applies to us still today. Just like the servants in this parable were given some of the master's resources to put to work for him, so the followers of the King have been given some of his resources to employ in his absence. More on that in a moment.

Second we see that the king is not gone forever. He will return. We've seen this before in the parables. Jesus is telling us he is going to come back and when he does there will be a rewards ceremony. We need to be ready for that. The biggest issue, of course, is whether we are a servant or an enemy. But there is also an important call here for his servants to be faithful with the resources the king has entrusted to us.

By the way, we must not get too literal in interpreting a parable. We need to remember that it is an illustration that typically has one main idea. Some people get off base when they observe that the faithful servants are rewarded the responsibility of ruling over cities. They conclude that if we are faithful to God with what he has entrusted to us we will be somehow rewarded by ruling over cities or territories in his eternal kingdom.

I kind of like that idea. I've been trying to be really faithful because I have my eye on some islands out in the Pacific that I think would be a terrific place to spend eternity. The problem is that none of that was Jesus' point. That's pressing details of an illustration too far. The rewarding of responsibility over cities was just part of the story. Everyone would understand that the servants were being rewarded with a prominent role in the king's administration because they were faithful. What does that mean for us if we are faithful? It means we will be rewarded, no more no less.

Yes, but rewarded how? We don't know and this story is not intended to tell us that. You can draw conclusions from it, but those conclusions will likely be wrong because that's not what Jesus meant. He was just telling a story. But the important lesson for us is that we will be rewarded either positively or negatively when the King returns, and we absolutely must be ready for that.

THE KING'S SERVANTS SHOULD TAKE THE RISK

The fact that there were opponents to the King is a critical element in this story. Political stability throughout history has often been in short supply. In the first century Rome imposed some structure, but transitions in power were still fraught with uncertainty and more than a little danger. When there was a power struggle in the ancient world there typically was bloodshed. For confirmation of this observe what happens in the Middle East to this day. It's still a violent and bloody process.

What is being tested when the ancient King entrusts these servants with a few thousand dollars? Is this about how much money they can make for the king? Had that been the case Jesus would have raised the amount of money involved. The profit earned by the servants would have been tidy, but not regime changing for a king. In his book, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (p. 400), Kenneth Bailey wrote of people in that culture, “Anyone who understands the total instability of the political milieu...will bury the money and wait to see who wins the right to rule: the nobleman or his known enemies...All the ‘smart money’ in town would be buried under the floor of a back room.”

Now we begin to understand why the servant who did nothing with the money is called “evil.” The problem was he refused to take sides. By taking the route that he did he kept himself safe. Yes, he feared the exacting King, but that was only part of the story. He also feared the consequences if, in fact, the nobleman lost his bid to be king and his opponents took power. The King’s former servant would suddenly be a part of the former regime, thus a possible threat. He was afraid and unwilling to take a risk, either of failing the King or of openly serving the King only to find out that his side had lost, and now he was in danger of being oppressed or worse, maybe lose his life. He played it safe.

The other servants who stepped out in faith had proven themselves not only faithful, but loyal. They were willing to take the risk of facing the opposition in the king’s absence and even of failing the king because that’s what he wanted them to do. They didn’t wait to see which way the wind was blowing before launching. In this story Jesus is teaching his followers there is going to come a time when he will not be here and there will be opposition. The question is, who will be loyal and take the risk of serving him, no matter what happens?

It is so easy for us to be like that third servant, sort of hedging our bets because we’re not quite sure how it’s all going to turn out, fearful of almost any outcome, trying to play it safe. The Bible does not depict the life of someone in whom the Spirit of Jesus lives as a life of fear and playing it safe. Psalm 27:3 says, “Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear; though war break out against me, even then I will be confident.” Isn’t that what you really want to be like? Don’t you want to be the person who says, “You want a piece of me? Bring it on. Do your worst, world, because my God is with me.” Who among us hears the story of David and Goliath and says, “Yeah, I’d like to be with the rest of the army of Israel, cowering and afraid.” We want to be David!

Psalm 118:6 says, “The LORD is with me; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?” That is the kind of person God wants us to be. In John 14:27 Jesus said, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” Don’t be afraid. Take the risk. Live with courage and confidence because the Lord is with you.

In 1 Corinthians 16:13 Paul said something very politically incorrect. He urged us to stand firm in the faith then he commanded us, all of us, to “*andrizomai*.” This is a verb form of the noun *andros*. There were two Greek words that could be translated “man.” This was one, the other is *anthropos*, from which we get anthropology (the field of study, not the clothing store). That second word means mankind, or human being. The other word, the one used in 1 Corinthians 16:13, meant a male, a man as opposed to a woman. So it literally meant to act or live like a man. In other words to be a real man. Don’t be that guy who stands there crying in fear like a little girl. Be the one who will stand up in the face of injustice, who will stand alone if necessary, who will stand for the cause of Christ when all others are falling away in fear. Be a man!

Yes, there have been women who have shown great courage. In fact, every mother has shown remarkable courage because she has been willing to go through the pain of childbirth to give life to her baby. But behind Paul’s command is this idea that a real man is one who will show courage, who will not cower in the face of opposition or danger, who will risk his own life if necessary to stand for his convictions and to protect his loved ones. This is a call to be like William Wallace in *Braveheart* or like Aragorn in the *The Return of the King* rallying the men of Gondor and Rohan as they cower before the fearsome forces of Sauron saying, “I see in your eyes the same fear that would take the heart of me. A day may come when the courage of men fails, when we forsake our friends and break all bonds of fellowship, but it is not this day. An hour of woes and shattered shields, when the age of men comes crashing down. But it is not this day. This day we fight!”

What kind of risk are we talking about taking? I suggest taking the risk of being uncommon. Being that rare person who lives in total confidence in God, sold out completely for the glory of his Lord Jesus Christ. It is so easy to be lulled to sleep, to simply go along with the world, to live for the same things everyone around us is living for, to not stick out but to blend in, to be satisfied with the world’s rewards.

The worlds' rewards will never be enough. Laurie and I were recently talking about our senior year in high school and I told her that I pretty much checked out after the first semester. I had enough units to graduate so I had a light academic load that last semester. It was great. My first class was at 10 in the morning and around 2 I headed out for baseball practice. I was over high school and pretty much just enjoyed baseball those last few months. But as I have told you I was a lousy athlete so I never played with a very few exceptions. At the end of the season they had an awards ceremony one evening for all the sports. I had decided not to go. I didn't care and besides, I wasn't getting any awards. My parents, who never had any interest in my athletic endeavors, uncharacteristically suddenly became insistent that I should go. They told me things like I owed it to my teammates who were getting awards. So I went. I was in for a surprise. I was given the award for Most Inspirational Player, which, of course, is what they give the guy who's terrible but tries hard. But it was a huge deal to me that my teammates wanted to pat me on the back and tell me I mattered to that team. I guess I got some sort of certificate, but the cool thing was they had a plaque that my name was going to be engraved on that hung on the wall in the administration building. What a cool thing. My name would be there forever. That's something to be proud of.

Maybe 14 or 15 years later I was in Bakersfield visiting my parents. I had to get a trophy for someone, can't even tell you why now, but I went to a trophy shop in town. As I was talking to the owner I happened to notice behind the counter a box of old plaques and trophies that were either being thrown out or recycled. Guess what I saw. It was the "permanent" plaque listing the Most Inspirational Players of each year from East Bakersfield High School. And listed on the plaque for my year there it was, the name Rick Myall. It was misspelled, and it was being thrown out. And there you have the rewards of this world. They don't last. They end up being as temporary and as meaningful as that plaque. I can't tell you who the most valuable player of that team was or any of the other awards. If you could track down my former teammates today and ask them who the Most Inspirational Player on that team was, I feel totally confident that not one of them would have a clue. So why should we make such things the object of our desire and pursuit?

God wants you to be freed of fear and to be focused on the eternal reward that he has for you and as a result to risk, to step out and be that uncommon person. Take the risk of being that rare person who loves Jesus and wants everyone he or she encounters to know that's he or she lives for. I think of Sherry Briggs, who was just a typical suburban wife and mom but she became concerned for the refugees and immigrants who live in City Heights amid terrible poverty. She felt God telling

her to do something about it. So she did, and today her ministry, Bridge of Hope is feeding hundreds of people in the name of Jesus.

I think of Micah and Alycia Vandover, a successful young married couple who felt God wanted them to bring the good news of Jesus to another part of the world. Micah quit his lucrative job and they moved to Okinawa to tell people about Jesus. They took a huge risk, having little to no support, but they believed that's what God wanted them to do.

It is likely that God is not calling most of us to take steps that drastic. But he still wants us to step out, trusting him. Take the risk of believing that God loves you, is with you and that you have nothing to fear. Yes, difficult things will happen in your life, yes, there are ominous things happening in our world, many things that are going on with our government may disturb you, but I challenge you to take the risk of being that person who, as Jesus said, doesn't let his heart be troubled. Be the person who trusts, who lives secure in his Lord's love and will for his life, and as a result attacks each day with enthusiasm and a positive spirit, knowing that this day you can live for the glory of God.

Take the risk of reaching out and caring about that person that God brings into your heart. Make that phone call, write that note, give that money that is necessary to express love to that person.

Take the risk of being the person who loves his or her spouse in an uncommon way. Be that person that others marvel at when they see how much you sacrifice to make that person you are married to feel loved and valued, to make God's love feel tangible for them. Recently Laurie and I had something happen twice in a short time span. The first time we were in a jewelry store where I was buying her a gift for our anniversary. The woman helping us said, "Oh, how long have you been married." We said, "33 years." She reacted with surprise (she asked if I married Laurie when she was 4). She asked, "What's your secret?" She wanted to know how we've done it. We told her that the heart of it was giving up self to serve each other. That's one risk God wants us to take. For husbands and wives to so give up self that they overwhelm their spouse with love. That they would create such a bond of love in that marriage that others will look on in astonishment.

THE KING'S SERVANTS SHOULD BE FAITHFUL

Let's not forget the obvious lesson here. The king's money was his money, not the servant's. He lent it to them with a charge to use it in a particular way. The question really wasn't how much they would produce, but would they be faithful to

use it as he instructed? Had the third servant even invested the money in a savings account at a quarter percent and earned only \$425 on that 17,000 in a year, the King would have patted him on the back because he would have followed his instructions. He might not have been the most remarkable person in the land, but he would have done as the King asked. He would have taken the risk and been faithful.

We, too, have been given some of the king's resources. He's not really concerned about how much we produce with it because in the end, he's the one who determines the result. What he cares about is whether we will be faithful. I recently read a true story from a woman named Barbara Lee Goldsboro. Her daughter, Dana, was getting married. Dana had chosen her 5 year old nephew to be the ring bearer in the wedding ceremony. The family was a little concerned when at the rehearsal it became apparent that he was intimidated when it came time for him to walk down that long aisle at the church. They feared that with the place filled with people he would freak out. His grandmother came up with a great idea. She said, "I'm going to give a big prize for whoever does the best in the ceremony tomorrow. They all held their breath when his turn came the next day, but the little guy performed without a hitch. After the ceremony his grandmother told him he had won the prize. He was excited but also greatly relieved. He said, "I was pretty sure I had it until Aunt Dana came in wearing that white dress with the music playing that son. Then I started thinking she might win." In his mind he had to beat out everyone in the ceremony, especially that lady in the white dress. He thought it was a competition. But in truth it was never a competition. All they hoped for was that he could do the best possible for him. And that's how it is with our rewards. It's not a competition. In the story the servants weren't competing with each other. All the King wanted to find out is whether they would be faithful.

We recently had more joy of moving. This spring we helped first Toby and Anna then Michael and Carissa move. We borrowed the Duewel's van and the Savittieri's truck at various times because the stuff we had to move wouldn't fit in our car. I really let our car have it for that. I went out in the garage and berated our Maxima, "What's wrong with you? Is moving too hard for you? Why can't you handle more stuff? You're just a terrible vehicle. I think you just want to get out of moving things and that's why you refuse to carry larger pieces of furniture." No, I didn't do that. That would be idiotic. Our car is what it is. It is a sedan. It was never built to be a moving van and it would be ludicrous to be upset with it because it's not. What I want from our car is to be as good at being what it is as it can be. If it operates well whenever I need it and is a joy to drive, if it is faithful to what it is made to be, then I am thrilled with it. You and I have been given

personalities, gifts, abilities, and resources by God. He doesn't compare us with someone else. He doesn't expect us to be something we're not. He just asks us to be faithful with what he has given us, but to do that with all of our might.

Mother Teresa, when she was still alive, was asked by a journalist how she kept going even though she knew she would never meet the needs of all the dying people of Calcutta. She said, "I am not called to be successful; I am called to be faithful. We have all been given some of the King's resources. Those resources include our own bodies and minds, our time, the abilities we have, the possessions we own. It's not really about how much of them God has entrusted us with nor with what we produce, but about how we think about it and how we use it. Let's be faithful with what God has entrusted to us.