

“Recklessly Invest Your Talents!”

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Scriptures: Matthew 25:14-30

25:1 "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this...

14 "For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; 15 to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. 16 The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. 17 In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. 18 But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

19 After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. 20 Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.' 21 His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.'

22 And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.' 23 His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.'

24 Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; 25 so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.'

26 But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? 27 Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. 28 So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents.

29 For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. 30 As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'"

Sermon

So what are some of the elements that make up a really good story? Well there are allegories, exaggeration, humor, a reversal of fortune, maybe a reference to current events, or the use of contrast and comparison and maybe an unexpected ending? And yes, there are others as well! Now I think that the parables of Jesus are really good stories. And like any good storyteller Jesus used many of those devices in order to not only to both capture and keep the attention of his audience but he also knew that if he made them have to struggle a bit they would likely better remember the core truths.

Our story this morning is actually the middle parable of three in Matthew chapter 25 which begins with Jesus' introduction "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this..."

The first parable seems eerily similar to the current reality TV show, "The Bachelor," where several bachelorettes try to win the attention of a most eligible single man. In Jesus' scenario, we have 10 vestal virgins who were awaiting the arrival of a certain very eligible "bridegroom." However they all fell asleep as the night wore on and the promised return of the bridegroom was for some reason unceremoniously delayed. But five of the virgins were considered "wise" because they were prepared for a possible delay and brought along extra oil for their lamps. In contrast the five other virgins "foolishly" failed to be so prepared and when they left to find more oil the bridegroom arrived taking the wise five with him and leaving them behind.

The third parable should be familiar to most of you and no doubt likely one of your favorites. It also references the highly anticipated return, at the end of time, of "the Son of Man in his glory, and all the angels with him." When this happens he will sit on the throne of his glory and begin to separate the sheep from the goats, or allegorically those who were at times unwittingly faithful to Jesus' instructions by caring for the poor, the widows and visiting those who are victims of the criminal justice system. Those seemingly clueless folks Jesus called "the virtuous!" The goats are by contrast not virtuous because they either didn't see the poor or couldn't find the time to care about the less fortunate. Again a possibly curious reversal of another recent reality show where folks get voted off an Island for being selfish and cutthroat.

Now the master who leaves on a journey planning to return some day was in the early church a dear and clear allegory for Jesus, who too had left but would be returning soon. But such stories in the New Testament are told for the purpose of instructing Jesus' followers to wait patiently, to be steadfast in their hope and to be both resolute and busy in acting like "little Jesuses" (which is the original definition of Christian! By the way) until that unknown day when he would suddenly pop on the scene again!

Exaggeration is used early in this parable as the departing man left truly staggering amounts of money in the care of his "slaves." One translation gives the amounts as 30,000, 12,000 and 6,000 silver coins respectively with this last and smallest amount being equal to nearly 20 years worth of a laborer's wages.

The "man" must have had a great deal of confidence and trust in those slaves since any one of them could have simply disappeared as well with enough money to likely retire on. But not only was the amounts entrusted to each servant astonishingly huge but the return on their investment is also a bit hard to believe! Now there are a lot of ways to doubled your money but most are either illegal or unscrupulous at best. To be legit usually means investing in things that have very high risk. But

investments with the greatest opportunity for high rewards also come with a higher risk of losing one's proverbial shirt. The other legit way to double your money is through blind luck.

Now the analogy between Jesus and the "man of wealth and taste," does begin to break down bit for a number of reasons. Not only was Jesus a poor homeless beggar but he seems to actually be praising those who are willing to do nearly "what ever it takes" to only make a mo' money.

In this scenario the "safest" bet of course was what the third slave did. By actually burying his Lord's treasure in a hole, out of a fearful perception of his seemingly ruthless and capricious boss' potential retaliation if his investments we somehow to go south.

Jesus is, of course, the opposite of that kind of human!

One has to wonder what the master would have said and done if the other two slaves had lost all their money on risky investments?

Now the landless peasants who would have likely gathered around Jesus to hear his stories were all too familiar with shrewd, dishonest and wealthy landlords many who lived in nice homes in Jerusalem or along the coasts of Galilee, far away from their property that was farmed mostly by the labor of indentured servants.

The wealthy also charged exorbitant fees and interest on loans that the poor relied on in order to merely survive. They also had hired hands and corrupt judges on their side and could make other offers that those poor peasants couldn't refuse. When small farmers couldn't pay off their debt, their only choice was to either sell their land or to sell themselves and maybe even their entire family into slavery to those unscrupulous lenders.

Finally it feels a bit troubling to hear Jesus, perhaps a poor laborer himself, end a story where the hapless slave was punished — exiled into the outer darkness, or that region that lay beyond the mountains where the flat earth came to an end. It also seems a bit unfair that the servant who already has the most wealth then gets the amount that the unwise servant kept safe.

But then again, isn't this the way things have always been — the rich always seem to get richer while the poor end up poorer. To include in your story what was "really going on" and with some sarcasm I might add, does not mean that you are promoting that kind of behavior. But on the contrary, it may actually cause your listener to struggle a bit more and actually retain the real point of the story.

Using the term "talents" is also still a handy way to remind us all that God gives to us generously things more than just money and that God also wants more from us than just our money. I'm just curious how many of you filled out the "talent survey" that Denise included in our annual monetary pledge drive?

But I wonder if we don't fail to also realize the sheer abundance, the utterly exaggerated amount that we also receive from God. According to the CDC the average person in the US gets 27,776.5 days, or 666,636 hours or nearly 40,000,000 minutes of life. We are surrounded by trees and plants that provide far more oxygen than any of us actually need and it happens without any effort on our part.

And there would be more than enough clean water for everyone if we humans would stop polluting and wasting so much of it. Food of course does take more work for some of us but we know that it is not production that is the problem but that some folks starve because how it gets distributed.

And while some of us are extremely able physically, or mentally, or emotionally, even those who are more limited still have their own special talents. All of us have received many undeserved gifts that can be used to enhance not only our lives but the lives of others. And of course last, but certainly not the least, Jesus has given each one of us the opportunity of living a new and fuller life. True life that can, in spite of even great hardships, be filled with joy and peace for ourselves and especially for others.

A veritable wild abundance of freely given talents of unmeasurable value have been entrusted to each and everyone of us to invest. The last thing that Jesus wants us to do with all that is bury it in some hole in the ground!

Instead, God is happy when we take what ever it is that we have been given and we use it to enhance the kind of world that God is still creating. Jesus is the man and he wants us to take our talents and invest it in some very risky, maybe even foolish endeavors, and usually this means taking a gamble on some very unlikely people.

People, unfortunately we know all too well, tend to provide the least predictable outcomes. Two weeks ago, we welcomed someone into the church in need of shelter. Not only did they provide us the gift of her poverty — the opportunity to give and serve without receiving anything in return — but they also just so happened to have Covid as well. Well, it spread quickly and before we knew it, three of our longer term residents got it and then this past week most of the new Venezuelan family, who had also began to shelter in our building, also came down with it.

We are a small church with limited monetary talents and what we have we give as generously as we can to the poor. But now, for the second Sunday in a row we've had to give even more, specifically our building that we use to gather together for worship. Perhaps we were too careless, or took too many risks? Maybe we took an unnecessary gamble on the wrong folks?

I don't know, but what I do feel confident about is this: when Jesus does return from his long strange trip I do hope he finds me busy — not busy collecting dimes and quarters for my piggy bank, but busy using as many of those 40 million minutes and all that free oxygen to help create the beautiful community he and God desires. A world full of love and peace.

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