

"Hedging Your Bet on God"

Nov 19, 2017

Thanksgiving Sunday

Matthew 25:14-30

The Story About Investment

14-18 "It's also like a man going off on an extended trip. He called his servants together and delegated responsibilities. To one he gave five thousand dollars, to another two thousand, to a third, one thousand, depending on their abilities. Then he left. Right off, the first servant went to work and doubled his master's investment. The second did the same. But the man with the single thousand dug a hole and carefully buried his master's money.

19-21 "After a long absence, the master of those three servants came back and settled up with them. The one given five thousand dollars showed him how he had doubled his investment. His master commended him: 'Good work! You did your job well. From now on be my partner.'

22-23 "The servant with the two thousand showed how he also had doubled his master's investment. His master commended him: 'Good work! You did your job well. From now on be my partner.'

24-25 "The servant given one thousand said, 'Master, I know you have high standards and hate careless ways, that you demand the best and make no allowances for error. I was afraid I might disappoint you, so I found a good hiding place and secured your money. Here it is, safe and sound down to the last cent.'

26-27 "The master was furious. 'That's a terrible way to live! It's criminal to live cautiously like that! If you knew I was after the best, why did you do less than the least? The least you could have done would have been to invest the sum with the bankers, where at least I would have gotten a little interest.

28-30 "Take the thousand and give it to the one who risked the most. And get rid of this "play-it-safe" who won't go out on a limb. Throw him out into utter darkness.'

I was playing in the dirt with my cousin, Leslie, at our grandmother's house the Saturday after Thanksgiving. We had managed to convince our respective mothers to let us stay with our grandmother for the weekend. I think we were 9 or 10 years old at the time. The only time I got to spend with my same-aged cousin was when there was a family get together and no school the next day. The Thanksgiving holiday break fit the bill.

My grandmother's front yard was fertile for snails. Les and I loved to dig up and study these fascinating little creatures. This particular Thanksgiving weekend, we decided to put them in a jar with some dirt and "grow them into bigger snails." What for, I am not sure, but if I had to guess, I'd say we planned to charge our little brother and sisters to see our snail zoo. Very likely.

We spent the better part of a full day gathering the mollusks out of the ground and playing with them. We would line them up and see if

they would race. Then we would face them off against each other and see if they would dance together across the lines. We put them in a wagon train circle and dropped beads of water on them to see if they would stay in formation or cut and run. You know, we did kid stuff with them. We didn't want to hurt them or kill them; we were more like *animal behaviorists*-yeah, we were *scientists*.

And at the end of our play time, we housed them back in the jar, punched holes in the lid using my grandmother's kitchen tools, and buried them under the soil.

We expected them to magically multiply and grow snail houses on their backs so that they would look more like the snails we had seen in picture books and less like gross little worms. At last that night, when we ran ourselves out of steam giggling and laughing under the down comforters in our grandmother's spare bedroom, we drifted off to dreams of snails and oceans and sunsets and all the money we would make the next day off our Snail Zoo.

Last week, we wrestled with the unfairness of Jesus' Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids. As you recall, there was a big wedding planned and all the community was anticipating the celebration. But on the appointed day the bridegroom was really late in arriving to collect the brides procession, and all the bridesmaids had fallen asleep.

When it was announced that he finally had arrived, half the bridesmaids had no fuel left in their lamps. Though they begged for reinforcements from the bridesmaids who had planned ahead and carried extra fuel for their lamps, they were denied, and they were not allowed into the wedding banquet. Matthew has Jesus telling this parable as one of the "end-times" warnings. Matthew is trying to hold together the fledgling Christian community, restless that Jesus has not returned to save them from their oppression. Matthew sends the message to the ones waiting that they better stay fueled and they better stay awake, for one never knows when Jesus will come a-callin' for them.

Today's story is another parable in the same vein, the third of four parables foretelling the end-times and the need to be ready for Jesus' return. This time again, the Master (who is Jesus) goes away for an extended period of time, leaving the treasures (the talents) of the faith in the hands of the servants, (the disciples and followers). His return signals Matthews prediction of the coming of the age of God's kingdom on earth.

The Master goes away, having given talents to the ones left behind. This leaving provides both the distance and room for the ones he has chosen and taught and who are bound to him in faith to lead,

grow, take chances, and flourish. Theologian Lindsay Armstrong explains the symbolism to us in this way:

Here, the exceptional love of God is not only shown by generosity in entrusting (to us) full talents; it is also demonstrated by God's willingness to self-limit so that we may exist and live creatively, in the image of God.

I really value this interpretation of the passage. It seems to me to answer one of the biggest questions we have about God—about why God allows us to make our own decisions, to make our own mistakes, and to make our own way *alongside* God rather than as subjugated to God. The Holy Spirit calls us to choose a life *with* God, to choose a life *for* God, a risky life, a fully invested life. We have the choice; God gives us the choice. How are we to respond to the question, "What is the meaning of my life?"

With this framing, now the parable now perhaps takes on a present meaning for us. First, the context:

Our English word, "talent," probably comes a traditional translation from this passage. Of course, we think of talent as God-given resources that are innate to us that we hone and then demonstrate to others in life. Our choir singers have talent. Our musicians are talented. Our Sunday School volunteers are talented

teachers of our young people. Talent can be refined, but let's face it—most talent is in-born, waiting to be discovered.

In Jesus's day, a talent was a measure of *financial* worth. It did not describe a person's attributes, but rather, only their bank account. A single talent was a huge sum of money; one single talent represented a unit of money approximating *fifteen years* of earnings by a day laborer. In this parable, therefore, each of the grants by the owner to his servants represented *big* money. Others have done the math: "To the servant that is given five talents is given more than a lifetime's worth of average wages: an amount equal to seventy-five years of earnings by a day laborer." Id.

We see that Matthew is telling us that Jesus gives us more than we could ever earn on our own, more than our own efforts could ever produce. He gives us all we need to build the kingdom of God and then he leaves us to it, to see what we can do on our own.

Christianity was a much riskier affair than it is today, at least in our country. In other countries that are ruled by oppressive regimes or terrorized by persons who wish to impose their religion on everyone else, even now in the 21st century, being Christian can get you killed. In America, being a Christian is a take-it-or-leave-it option, rather than a compulsion. You don't have to be Christian to get a job, to own a house

or land, to get your child educated, or even to be invited to the neighborhood Christmas party.

Being Christian today is like being the third servant, the one who takes his talent—his gift from God—and buries it under the soil, or in the words of another famous parable, who hides the light under a bushel basket. It seems as though nothing is required of us these days—no investment, little risk and little innovation. God and Jesus can be an afterthought in our lives, and in this time in history, no one will imprison us, torture us, disenfranchise us, or even exclude us if we don't go to a church, don't pay a tithe, or don't profess our allegiance to the Holy Trinity.

One of the ancient church's seven deadly sins, sloth, describes the character of the Christian church today. I brought you last week John Buchanan's thoughts about the plight of the five foolish bridesmaids. In relation to today's parable, he writes:

"Sloth" means not caring, not loving, not rejoicing, not living up to the full potential of our humanity, playing it safe, investing nothing, being cautious and prudent, digging a hole and burying the money in the ground.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer in 1930s Germany said that the sin of respectable people is running from responsibility. He took his responsibility so seriously that he was killed for it. A pacifist by nature, he joined in

what turned out to be a failed plot to assassinate Adolph Hitler. He risked it all. He showed us that Jesus asks nothing less of us than to "be bold and brave, to reach high and care deeply. So the parable is the invitation to the adventure of faith; the high-risk venture of being a disciple of Jesus the Christ." Id.

The servants who risked big were applauded by the Master for their daring investment and the subsequent big payday. But what if they had lost all the money in a get-rich quick scheme or on a roulette wheel? Would their Master be thrilled with them then? Would they get the *atta-boy* that the Master gave them when he patted them on the head and said, "Well done, good and faithful servant?"

The poor sloth who went out and buried the money would then appear to be a genius, wouldn't he? Being cautious with the precious talent he had been given, he chose safety, and he could then return the investment wholly when the Master came seeking an accounting.

Well, we will never know. That's not how Matthew writes this story of Jesus. Matthew is not looking for people to play it safe. He is not looking for disciples to keep quiet about Jesus in protection of their own lives and properties. He doesn't want followers of the faith to hedge their bets on God. He wants *gamblers*. He wants *investors*. He wants *risk-takers*, for without them, Christianity will die

out and the beauty of Jesus' life, message, and willingness to die for a new way of living will die with the Christian religion.

Don't we face the same situation today? You hear it everywhere—Our sister churches cry out, "We are *dying*! No one comes to worship anymore! We can't pay the bills or keep our property up any longer. We have to rent the church building out to a preschool if we are to keep the doors open!"

You see it everywhere, too. Church worship takes a back seat to every commercial enterprise in our society. Maybe in some places you still can't buy a car or a six pack of Budweiser on a Sunday, but you sure can go to a show or a soccer game, you can fly somewhere else in an airplane or sit home and watch the 11 am football game in your jammies. Christianity is the lazy religion of our country today. When you think about it, we have it really easy, and our lackadaisical approach to our faith disavows the sacrifices made, the terror endured, and the dogged determination demonstrated by the people of Matthew's time as they made the choice—they took the risk—to be *Christians* when being Christian could very well end your life.

That's what this parable is about. When seen in this light, one can understand better why the servant who played it safe with his talent was not what God needed in the world.

Back at my grandmother's house the next morning, Leslie and I went outside to the dirt patch to retrieve our jar of snails, ready to make a fat profit off our unsuspecting, but entirely gullible younger siblings. We expected, too, that our parents and grandparents would reward us for our skill in saving the snails and for our enterprising ways in setting up our money-maker, our Snail Zoo.

Imagine our shock and dismay when we pulled the jar out of the ground only to find all the snails had died during their confinement. And the smell—good Lord Jesus, I still remember the smell of the inside of that jar! We looked at each other and we looked back at the jar and we shook our heads in disappointment that our enterprise had failed and that our new pet snails had succumbed during the night. We cried.

We had buried the treasure. We hadn't let it do its work in the yard, multiplying and eating the bad bugs that otherwise would have destroyed our grandmother's rose bushes. "Oh, well," we sniffled aloud. "There's plenty more bugs in the ground if we ever want to try to revive our Snail Zoo idea again. We'll just go and find something else to do. Anyway, it's Sunday morning and we don't have to go to church today. Our parents and our cousins will be here soon and we'll enjoy a big turkey meal and pumpkin pie. What's the risk? What's the harm?"

Let us hear what the Spirit is saying to her church.