

Investing in Abundance  
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The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill  
November 15, 2020  
Matthew 25:14-30

Stewardship Sunday is next Sunday, November 22, the Sunday before Thanksgiving. If you are a member or friend of the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill, you will receive a pledge card this week. Even in COVID-world, we are seeking to maintain some of the flavor of a non-COVID pledge year, with a “drive-through,” socially-distanced Stewardship Sunday. Come to the church next Sunday with your pledge card, either between 9:00 and 10:00 a.m. or 12:00 noon and 1:00 p.m. We will have treats and a special thank you gift for you. Also, you are invited to bring shelf-stable food items for our mission partner friends. If next Sunday at those times is not feasible, you can certainly mail your pledge to the church office. But join us if you can.

By the time that next Sunday rolls around, I am hopeful you will have made your prayerful stewardship decision, first of all to pledge, whether you have or have not in the past, and then to increase that pledge if you are able. The letter we have sent will make the case in particular terms regarding our 2021 budget and needs. But in a sense, you already know the case – our ministry, its people, this place, all need your support in a time when the good news we have received is needed so clearly. We know that for some, economic uncertainty is a reality. Bless you in these moments. We also know that for others, giving is possible, and increased giving is possible. We will speak a bit to that theme, “Walking in Faith,” next week. But even now, as we walk in faith, trusting God when we take the next step even if the path is unknown, you are invited to make that faith real through the sharing of all of your faith gifts, including your financial resources.

Plus, today, the lectionary gives us a perfectly-timed parable that tees it up in a beautiful way for our stewardship response. You have just heard this parable from Matthew’s gospel, often called the “parable of the talents.” What on earth is going on here? What on earth is Jesus up to? All fall he has been telling provocative stories. On one hand he has provoked one part of his audience, those with religious and political power, by insisting they were missing God’s true purposes. On the other hand he has provoked another part of his audience, those with NO religious and political power, by insisting they were closer to God’s vision of things than they could understand. Story after story after story.

Let us recall how provocative and preposterous this all is. A story where people worked all day and worked just an hour and got paid exactly the same thing. A rich man who throws a banquet. The very important people do not show up, so the less important people are invited. Or ten bridesmaids waiting for the groom – five are ready and five are not. What on earth is going on here? What on earth is Jesus up to? Who is in and who is out and who is this Jesus and who is this God who provokes and defies convention and transforms expectations?

And today? What on earth is going on here? What on earth is Jesus up to? You have just heard it. The bottom line is that the one given the most by the master before he leaves – the one with the most to

lose – takes the greatest risk, and so forth, and so on. The master returns and each gives an account of what they did.

The most risk averse receives the harshest condemnation. So many questions...

- What are we to take away?
- Is this an investment strategy gone haywire?
- If the master is to be God, or Jesus, what are we to make of the seeming harsh cruelty? Is the one given the five talents the rich in real life?
- How does that connect with all the previous parables, where those with power and resources are criticized?
- What does Jesus mean by “ability” here – the one with the most “ability” was given the most money.
- Is ability faith?
- Or is the one given the five talents the poorest, who can afford to be risky because they have nothing to lose?
- Or do they know what they have, so they can spend it abundantly because they know their master has their back, while the poor in real life rely on things, and power, while in fact in terms of ultimate things, they have so very little?

What IS going on here? A parable is like a precious jewel; that is, you can look at it from a number of perspectives and always discover a new and beautiful facet. You can read a parable one day and discover one thing; you can read it the next and discover something entirely different. And to encounter such a parable in a communal setting means that we bring all of our perspectives and experiences to bear on our understanding of what Jesus is trying to say, and is saying.

Charles Cousar writes that “Waiting and watching for Jesus’ return really means being good stewards of all our resources...” (*Texts for Preaching, Year A*, page 569)

And then he asks the question we might be wondering. “What about servant number three?” What about him? We have no indication that anything was wrong with him – as far as we can tell he is not dishonest, or irresponsible.

And not only do we ask questions of the servants’ response, we wonder about the master. Jesus is here, Dale Bruner reminds us, but he is going away in order to return. (*Matthew: A Commentary*, 2, pages 552 and ff) He gives his servants, his followers, large responsibility when he leaves. And then he comes back.

What do they do in the meantime? What do we do in the meantime? Our responsibility is to act. We don’t sit around waiting. Bruner writes that in this parable, “activity, not passivity, is the mode of Christian hope.” Servant number one got busy, he moved, he worked, he got results. The problem with servant number three, Bruner says, is the “lack of adventure, the unwillingness to take risk, a preoccupation with one’s own security...to be unworldly, withdrawn, removed.”

We are sent into the world, not out of it. That being sent into the world has a different feel during a global pandemic, but you get the point. We are given a mission. We read the parable and cringe when the master calls the third servant evil. What happened to grace? What happened to welcoming and acceptance? In this case, Bruner says, it *is* evil to do nothing at all, to sit on our symbolic hands and do nothing with the gifts God gives us, when the abundance is so powerful and the need is so real. We might want to take a bit of the edge off, but here Jesus confronts us with one of our deepest impulses. “What’s so wrong with being cautious?” Cousar asks. “Discretion and deliberateness are virtues, not vices.” The evil is not in the cautious investment strategy, but something else. “Prudence and wariness,” Cousar writes, “easily become self-protectiveness and restraint. Inhibition turns to fear.”

Fear, not love. Fear, not hope. Fear, not freedom.

I promise you that the Stewardship Committee and I did not arrange this parable to show up the Sunday before Stewardship Sunday. In fact, several commentators bemoan the fact that this passage comes up in the late fall when churches across the country are doing what we are doing because it leads us to focus only on the monetary implications of the parable. But here it is.

Even so, this parable is about many things. Hope and trust, that when we make an investment in abundance that the reward will be great. And faith, having the faith that when we give that our giving will make a difference. That’s what “Walking in Faith” looks like, making an RSVP to the financial invitation placed before us for next year as a very real outgrowth of our desire to take this church that God has given us and invest it – this “talent” – its people, its time, its building, its resources, its mission, its worship, its connections, and to realize more for our investment.

Investing is not gambling. Two of the three servants took risks, but they were not faithless risks. I am not a gambler. I don’t really know what “doubling down” means, but I know it means taking a risk. That’s what servants 1 and 2 did. They doubled down on hope. That’s what we do when we pledge, or log in to worship, or share our time. We invest in the abundance of hope, walking in faith even when the future is not always clear. We live not from fear, but from hope. We double down on hope. We are all in on love. We are playing with house money when it comes to grace. Those are all the gambling phrases I know.

But I know that even as the gambling language is inadequate, so is the investment language.

But listen to the parable again. The one with the most – grace – had the riskiest investment strategy, because, at the end of the day, there was no risk at all. Only reward. Only blessing. Only hope. Only grace. How could we not invest extravagantly because God has invested in us so abundantly? And look what we receive – well done, we are told. Enter into my joy. Happy Sunday before stewardship Sunday. Thank you for your giving. Well done! May you be blessed, even as your giving is a blessing. Amen.