

INVESTING OUR FAITH IN RISKY TIMES

Matthew 25:14-30

Considering today's economic climate I can't imagine a worst time to be reading the gospel parable of the *Talents*. If Jesus were to retell the story today it would probably be a cautionary tale. *Be prudent with the gifts that God has given you. Hold on to them. Don't take chances. Be cautious.* Chances are pretty good that the two slaves who took the talents that the Master had given them and traded them on the free marketplace would have lost just about everything. The slave who dug a hole and stuck the money in the ground might well have been commended as the wise investor in a time of collapsing markets. The Master's tirade to the one-talent slave to at least deposit the money in the bank would be a terrible idea especially when banks are collapsing and going bankrupt. This is just not a good economic climate to hear a Gospel tale about making risky investments.

And yet this is the story that God has given us for today. What can it tell us about making investments with the resources God gives us in these risky times?

The Master in Jesus' parable has gone away, but will return. He left behind gifts to his servants to make something out of and they know full well that there will be an accounting of what they have done with those gifts once he returns. As in the parable our Lord has made capitol investments in each of us and in the Church. What are some of those investments? For us as individuals:

- Forgiveness of our sins
- Welcome and adoption as his children
- The gift of the Holy Spirit, his power working in us
- The promise that Jesus would always be near us
- Love
- The hope of eternal life

Corporately the Church has been entrusted with

- God's Word – the Scriptures
- The Eucharist as a continuing meal of remembrance
- The gift of Christian Community
- The Christian heritage from the Apostolic time until now
- The mission to proclaim the good news of God's Kingdom to all people everywhere

Many commentators writing about this passage talk somewhat disparagingly about the *one-talent servant*, as if that third slave had extremely limited resources and was understandably afraid to risk them. A *talent* was a measure of gold weighing between 50-75 pounds. This past week gold futures closed at \$743 an ounce. That means in today's market a *talent* is worth between \$1,188,800 and \$1,783,200. That's a pretty good chunk of change even for a *one-talent servant*! The money entrusted by the master

to his slaves was a fortune! Certainly one thing Jesus was emphasizing in the parable of the Talents was that God has entrusted great riches in us.

And yet, as the O.T. scholar Walter Bruggeman says, *“We never feel that we have enough; we have to have more and more, and this insatiable desire destroys us,”* (*Christian Century*, March 24-31, 1999). *“Whether we are liberal or conservative Christians, we must confess that the central problem of our lives is that we are torn apart by the conflict between our attraction to the good news of God’s abundance and the power of our belief in scarcity — a belief that makes us greedy, mean and unneighborly.”*

Jesus commended those first two servants for taking the riches the master had entrusted in their care and making something out of them. In each case they doubled the Master’s investment. Pretty good return on investment in a bull market but a remarkable investment return today.

And yet I bet you know some people like those two servants, people making a remarkable return on God’s investment in them. Can you think of someone who is a shining example of generosity? Someone who is always doing something good for others, always volunteering, always making meals, always dependable, always generous with their time and friendship. I bet you know some people like that. I know several in this parish. These are people like the first two servants in Jesus’ parable who risked giving away the great riches of love that they have received, often spending it foolishly on others. And what happens to the gift of God’s love? Is it dissipated by their spending it unwisely? No, the gift is multiplied.

In fact, multiplication of gifts is exactly what Jesus’ parable calls us to do. I think of the Sr. Warden in my former parish who wanted to begin a ministry of knitting prayer shawls as gifts for home bound parishioners. She could have done wonderful works by knitting the shawls and giving two or three away a year. But instead of that Nancy organized a prayer shawl ministry, created a knitters group, taught people how to knit and recruited. Instead of one knitter doing a good deed there are 18 knitters doing great work and enjoying one another’s company. They have long since given several shawls to each home bound parishioner and are now sending shawls to nursing homes and hospitals across the country! I think of the Rev. Richard Schuster who accepted the role of director of a small foundering charitable organization at St. Luke’s in South Stamford and through his vision, organizational skill, and inspiration to others has grown that ministry to now provide housing, human services and inspiration towards life-long learning to hundreds of individuals every day.

Corporately I think of St. John’s Church in the mid 1980’s risking about a ½ acre of land next to the church and having the vision to develop it. Canterbury Green and the continuing income from it has not only helped fund St. John’s, it has also enabled us to give millions of dollars to provide housing and help needy people in Stamford over the past 20 years. I think of the vision that called a new Christian community for a growing Haitian population into being, thus beginning L’Eglise de L’Epiphanie. I think of the idea to offer a small Christmas event as a way to bring people into St. John’s doors

during the Christmas season and the beautiful Christmas Show that has grown out that idea.

What Jesus is calling us to do in the Parable of the Talents is to be bold and multiply the gifts he gives us for ministry. Whether we are 5 or 2 or 1 talent people we have still been given an abundance of riches by his grace. He invites us like those first two servants to risk using those gifts in order that we might multiply them.

Today five people are being trained to be *Lay Eucharistic Ministers* and extend the altar rail to those who are sick or home bound. The clergy can and do visit these individuals – 3 or 4 times a year – but with a number of *Lay Eucharistic Ministers* those individuals will soon be visited much more often.

Our Vestry and I are in the midst of developing a new mission and vision statement that will help to shape our life and ministry. One phrase we worked on but ultimately rejected was that we are a community of *miraculous expectation*. The phrase may not work in a mission statement but it's a good reminder of the kind of multiplication Jesus' parable invites us to make of the riches we have received. We should expect miracles. We should expect God to do great things through us. We should expect God to multiply our ministry. We should be bold. We should be a community of *miraculous expectation*.

St. John's Rising, the building project we are envisioning, is not just for ourselves and the ministries housed in our buildings – L'Eglise de L'Epiphanie, the International Institute and boy scouts – it should also provide housing for many other ministries and organizations: cub scouts and girl scouts, N.A. and A.A. groups, and direct programs to serve the needs of our community. God expects us to take the riches he has given us and multiply them.

How, in our own lives, can we multiply the riches of the gifts that God has entrusted in us? "If I had my life to live over ... pondered one of Bernie Siegel's patients,

*I would take more chances, I would take more
Trips, I would scale more mountains,
I would swim more rivers, and I would
Watch more sunsets. I would eat more
Ice cream and fewer beans.
I would have more actual troubles
And fewer imaginary ones. You see ...
I was one of those people who lived
Prophylactically and sensibly and sanely,
Hour after hour and day after day
... I've been
One of those people who never went anywhere without
A thermometer, a hot water bottle, a gargle, a
Raincoat and a parachute
If I had it to do all over again,*

*I'd travel lighter, much lighter,
Than I have.
I would start barefoot earlier
In the spring, and I'd stay that way
Later in the fall. And I would
Ride more merry-go-rounds, and
Catch more gold rings, and greet
More people, and pick more flowers,
And dance more often. If I had it
To do all over again.
But you see,
I don't.*

Nadine Stair, an 85 year old patient of Siegel's was facing death when she wrote those words. (As quoted in his Peace, Love and Healing: Bodymind Communication and the Path to Self-Healing (New York: Harper and Row, 1989, 245-46) Part of the multiplication of the riches that God gives us is to use them, to risk living them, to risk walking barefoot even if we step on some burrs, to love others even though we will sometimes get stomped on. But if we had it to do over wouldn't we want to take more risks with the blessed gifts God has entrusted in us?

How can you risk growing the love and grace and forgiveness that God has placed in your life? How can you use his gifts, share them, spend them, trade them? Sure it's a risky market. Sure you may lose more than you gain. But would you rather bury the remarkable gifts God has given you? Would you rather the new life he has begun in you just sits on the shelf? Or would you rather risk breaking of God's precious gifts by breaking them open and spending them?