

Wise Investing

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Psalm 90

Matthew 25:14-30

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This is a message about investing. Not simply money but life. Where do we spend our time and our energy and our money? What values and ideas and concepts do we focus on and put our energies into so they flourish? Where are we willing to take a risk? Who are we willing to trust? Who will we serve? As Bob Dylan sang, “You gotta serve somebody.” Who will it be? These scripture texts are about what to do in the in-between times, between Christ’s first and second coming.

Jesus in Matthew tells this little story about a master who goes off on an extended trip and leaves his vast wealth under the care of three servants, each given a different amount according to their abilities. Jesus describes the stewardship of each. Two of them readily put the master’s resources to work, and by the time he returns, have doubled his resources for him. The master praised each, “Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful with a few things – I will put you in charge of many things. Enter into the joy of your master.” But the third, who has a fearful distrustful attitude of the master, is immobilized. He simply buries the resources he is charged to oversee, and for this is cast into the outer darkness, and what he had is given to the one who was most productive, and Jesus utters, “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.”

What is going on here? Is this a message about rapacious unchecked capitalism, the survival of the fittest, the elimination of the weak? No, this is a message about the urgency of the gospel, trusting the giver and living in relationship to Him because the time is short. The take home message is, “Givers are Livers.” Givers are invited to the joy of the banquet in God’s Kingdom. That Kingdom is worth our all, for it is finally the only thing that will endure.

There is a remote part of France filled with barren hills. Early in the 20th century there were no trees, just open rocky countryside, and not particularly appealing. A man used to go back to this area every few years to visit with relatives in the nearby village, and he would go out and take long walks in those hills. Each time he did, he noticed a shepherd out there, tending his sheep. And over his shoulder the shepherd had a great sack. A sack containing seeds. As he walked along, this shepherd would reach in that sack, pull out a seed, then bend down and plant it in the dirt beneath his feet. It seemed a rather futile effort. But as the man returned in future years he noticed how those seeds had become little saplings, and then little trees. When he came back twenty years later a lush verdant forest had grown up, all because one shepherd planted seeds day after day as he walked along caring for his sheep.

A life of faith is a life of seed planting and trusting. By faith we live in partnership with God. By faith we rely on God for life, breath, everything. And we return to God from the resources God places in our care. A sort of Divine “Lend-Lease” Program. God owns it, God

leases it to us, we tend it and return it to God, the owner and giver. It is a back and forth, come and go, receiving and giving action, like breathing. God gives to us, and we take it and work it and give it back to God to say thank you. We give back by giving to those people and causes which bless others and bless the heart of God. Jesus summed up the attitude in his Sermon on the Plain, promising, "Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back."ⁱ Givers are liverers.

I

Now the problem in the story Jesus tells near the end of Matthew is that the third servant does not trust the master. He is overcome by fear. He refuses to love. He does not exercise faith, hope or love in what might be possible. Each of the servants has certain abilities, and the master entrusts varying amounts to each "according to his ability."ⁱⁱ Yet the parable is not about abilities but about attitude. Not fairness but faithfulness. Life is not fair, and some people experience a much more difficult journey than others. Some people are naturally endowed with greater gifts and abilities than others. But everyone should be given an opportunity. Yet this servant does not take his opportunity, does not put his abilities to work with what he is given.

This is not a story about abilities but about attitude. We have no indication that the first two servants were financial geniuses. The first two simply did their best with what they were given. Best as they could, they put the resources to work. The third servant did not even try. The talents they were all given by the master were not abilities like carpentry or engineering. They were finances. A talent was a measure of money, a very large measure of money. By our standards today, a single talent would be worth about \$300,000. So the five talent man was given well over a million dollars to oversee, and the one talent man had care for a considerable sum as well.

Yet he was immobilized by his perception of the master. He wrongly perceived the master as a mean-spirited ruthless harsh man. "I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground."ⁱⁱⁱ

Notice nothing prior to this statement indicates this is characteristic of the master. Indeed the master seems to be extremely generous, trusting, hospitable and benevolent. He is willing to leave all his resources in the care of his servants and let them decide how to take care of them. Through their stewardship they have the opportunity to bless others. And the two who manage well continue their work, with more earned and given. They are blessed to be a blessing.

But this third servant has such a shriveled partial view that he refuses to engage. No risk. No investment. He has a view that the master is wicked and not to be trusted. Now if the master is an allusion to God, then here is a person with a view of God as distant, remote, arbitrary. Here is a cynic who views God as an angry, harsh, ill-tempered old man.

C.S. Lewis once described love as being vulnerable. He said,

“To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket – safe, dark, motionless, airless – it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable.”

Such is the condition of the third servant. Because the third servant is unwilling to love and trust the master he sees only an ugly partial perspective of the master. Hard hearted, he does nothing productive with what is put in his care. Fearing the master, he simply digs a hole to hide what is intended to be used for good and multiplied. Oh he returns it intact, (which I know in today’s market may sound like a good deal, but it is not), and yet for this he is thrown out and his share is given to the man who was most productive. This servant is immobilized by fear. He refused to love.

II

The other two servants are empowered by faith, hope and love. They trust their master and step out to work what is in their keeping. They risk. They engage. They invest. Jesus tells this story, you see, not simply as a sweet little bedtime tale about using individual gifts and talents, but as a disturbing story about what Christians do or do not do with the Gospel in tough times - as we wait for the coming of the Kingdom of heaven.^{iv} Do we release the Gospel to do its work?

I love the description of Aslan, the great Lion, who is a symbol of Christ in C. S. Lewis’ children’s story, The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe. In his Chronicles of Narnia, as the children in the story have entered this strange kingdom of Narnia through the wardrobe they ask who Aslan is. They learn that Aslan is the great King and Lord of the forest of Narnia. He is not always there. Yet they learn he is on his way back, and when he comes he will fix the situation in Narnia where it is always winter and break the Witch’s curse.

“Wrong will be right, when Aslan comes in sight,
At the sound of his roar, sorrows will be no more,
When he bares his teeth, winter meets its death,
And when he shakes his mane, we shall have spring again.”

Susan, one of the children, asks, “Is he safe?” Mr. Beaver replies, “Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.” It is this goodness of the master that the first two servants trust, and so take what they are entrusted with and grow it. Unlike the third servant who is immobilized by fear, these two are empowered by faith, hope, and love.

III

These first two servants remain confident in the goodness of the master. He’s not safe but good. This is what the third servant misses, and so fearfully digs a hole and tries to wait it out. Because he is obsessed about his own safety, his own situation and not the master’s, he

finds himself cast out where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. The master is not safe but the master is good. The first two servants respond to their opportunity even as the Thessalonian community is called to do, by waking up to the times in which they live and laying hold on the faith, hope and love the master offers as their protective armor, breastplate and helmet, their light in the midst of darkness. You see both the epistle admonition and the gospel parable call to us to wake up and become fully alive - engaged in the healing and renewing of God's world.

It is this work and this calling that shapes our attitude. As I have said – this is a story not about abilities but attitudes. It is because God came to earth and showed us his heart in Jesus Christ. God's attitude toward us, that we can actually become his presence in this dark world bringing light, healing and hope, that we can respond to his charge to us, "look after my things, take care of my children, spread my good news," we can respond with a confident, "Here am I Lord. Use me. Send me. Make me an instrument of your peace."

I read somewhere that there was a Roman Catholic Church up in Indiana that after Vatican II and all the changes that renewal movement brought, tore down their vivid life-sized crucifix that hung in the front of their church above the altar. Jesus on the cross with a spear in his side, blood dripping out, a crown of thorns crushed upon his brow, blood dripping down. They took that bloody crucifix down and instead strung up a chain of large letters across the chancel - L-O-V-E. It disturbed some of the traditionalists, while some of the progressives for awhile thought it was really trendy, cutting edge. However over time, it became pretty flat, a little saccharine, until someone came up with the bright idea of putting that old crucifix back up there, hanging it in front of those words. So you look through the cross to the love. Only in that way do you understand the power and tenacity of real love. Love that brought Jesus to the cross.^v As John's First Letter puts it,

"In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. If we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us."^{vi}

Our faith, hope and love are grounded in the trustworthiness of God, our master. Because God is generous toward us, because God showed us just how much he loves by sending his own Son to die on the cross for us and to rise from the tomb for us, we are called and equipped and enabled to live with generous spirits and open hearts towards God and towards God's earth. We are enabled to respond to God's generosity by living generously toward others, in these in-between times. After the resurrection and ascension, and before Christ's second coming in judgment, we have opportunity to take care of his things. We have work to do.

As I began to write this sermon on Thursday I had just read the morning news. Yes, even though I have an I phone, I still like my news in print on paper that I can fold and turn! Guess it comes from growing up in a newspaper editor and printer family. Thursday was a bad hair news day. So many things we have relied on are collapsing. One Presidential candidate had a string of moral and ethical charges pointing his direction. Another Presidential candidate could not remember the third department of government he was promising to eliminate if elected. Birmingham was filing for bankruptcy, "Bankrupt – \$4.23 billion: Jefferson County Collapse

largest in US History,” the bold headlines read. Above that, saddest of all the news, the fall of America’s best-loved, most admired, longest-serving, most-trusted coach. The headline read, “Penn State Coach Joe Paterno, (Penn State) President Fired.” Add to that old news of the ongoing recession, high unemployment, the Alabama Immigration Law, the debt crisis in Italy. Wow! One is almost tempted, like the third servant – to dig a hole and put our head in it!

But friends, it is a wonderful time to be alive as a follower of Jesus Christ. It is a wonderful time to allow his light to shine in you and through you. So much darkness demands a lot of light, faith, hope and love that we have in the Lord. Remember the goodness of the Lord. He’s not safe but he is good and he is at work in you, if you will let him.

During the uncertain days when the Continental Convention was meeting in Philadelphia in 1787, forging our United States Constitution – would the colonies become one or not - there came an eclipse of the sun. It struck terror in the hearts of many of the delegates as darkness descended upon them at noon, and some moved that the proceedings be recessed so that all could get to their homes and loved ones in the event that this was the end of the world. It was then that old Dr. Ben Franklin, his famous double spectacles now low on his nose, rose and said, “I move sir that candles be brought and that if this be the end of the world as we know it, that we be found doing our duty.”

That is the role of these servants in Jesus’ parable. That is our role. Let us be found doing our duty, generously giving ourselves to him and to those things that warm his heart and heal his land. In such a time as this, let us pray and let us work, ora et labora, to carry out our prayers,

“Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands - O prosper the work of our hands!”^{vii}

Amen.

ⁱ Luke 6:38

ⁱⁱ Matthew 25:15

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 25:24-25

^{iv} Thomas Long, Matthew, p.281

^v David Buttrick, Speaking Parables, p.175

^{vi} 1 John 4:10-12

^{vii} Psalm 90:16, 17