

Living the Good Life
Matthew 25: 14-30
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What a timely story! Who among us hasn't wondered if the best thing to do with our money is to bury it in the backyard or stuff it under a bed pillow? It's refreshing to hear of someone who actually does what many of us are tempted to do. But as with most of Jesus' parables, the story is much more complex than it initially appears. This certainly isn't a story about money management or wealth preservation...and it isn't even entirely about money.

When we read this parable alongside the stories that precede and follow it, we realize that it is one in a series of parables about people waiting for Jesus Christ to return to earth. In each of these stories, a leader goes away, and people have to make choices about how they will live while their leader is gone. And in all of these stories, the leader is Jesus Christ, and we are those who wait for him, such as this servant.

Many who lived during Christ's lifetime believed that Jesus would return before they died. The gospel writers frequently warn people not to be caught unaware – if you don't know when Jesus will return, you have to stay awake... keep your lamp lit...and be prepared to give an account of how you are living, and the way you are investing the resources given to you. So the burning question of the day was, "what do we do until the master returns?"

2000 years later we don't have the same sense of urgency, but this is still the right question. "What do we do until Jesus returns?" Or, more simply, "How do we live? What do we do with this one life that we have been given, and how should we use the resources with which we have been blessed?"

Unfortunately for the slave in today's parable, these are not the questions he is asking. He is asking some other, very human, very rational questions. "How can I protect myself? What is the best way to avoid risk... to stay out of trouble?" Motivated by fear and self-preservation, the slave chooses to do nothing.

So this could lead us to feel rather sorry for this man. He didn't do anything unethical. He didn't throw away someone else's money on frivolity or invest it in a foolish pyramid scheme. He protected what he had been

given, no more, no less. To be thrown in the outer darkness, “where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth” seems disproportionately harsh.

However, we have to remind ourselves how the story begins. The master, Jesus, is leaving for a long journey, and he entrusts everything to his slaves, or servants. Everything. The parable doesn’t tell us how the master has earned this money, but it does present a very positive view of wealth creation. Money, in this story, is something that can be invested in a way that not only provides a financial return on investment, but also returns dividends in the form of God’s pleasure and sheer joy.

Then, Jesus gives everything he has to people whose role is to serve him. This kind of trust is above and beyond anything a servant could expect from the boss. And, it seems that the servant did nothing to deserve the talent. It was a gift, freely given, and a very generous one. It could take a worker 15 years to earn a single talent. But instead of expressing gratitude, the servant seems to resent the gift. He never says, “thanks for the talent” or, “Boy, I really appreciate your trust in me.” Instead, he blames the master for his own failure to act, saying, “I knew you were a harsh man.” Like a child who says, “well, I never asked to be born,” he looks to absolve himself of all responsibility.

It doesn’t work that way, does it? As a result of this parable, the word “talents” has come to mean God-given gifts and graces, not just money. So God has entrusted us with all kinds of talents, and there is an implied obligation. I don’t get to say, “I didn’t ask to be born in this country...I didn’t ask to be blessed with wealth or privilege or a functioning brain and body and heart...So if I choose not to use my God-given gifts, who cares? It’s up to me, right?”

Well, it is up to me – to us – but if our talents aren’t really ours in the first place, then it isn’t *entirely* up to us. In our story, the talents were the master’s, and should have been invested. Invested in some way that furthered his interests. Instead, the talents just sat there in the mud, not hurting anyone, but not helping anyone either.

So the servant’s failure to use the talents isn’t just bad business. It’s a rejection of Christ, and more importantly, *a rejection of the abundant life Christ offers*. Other servants invest their talents and double their investment.

They are rewarded not only with more talents but are invited to “enter into the joy of your master.” This curious phrase, “enter into the joy,” is Jesus’ way of saying to them, “come and experience the abundant life I have in store for you...and help me to make that life a reality!” Jesus tells them, “I am giving you more gifts, because I trust that you will invest them in creating the kingdom of God!”

And that’s what we have to decide today. How do we accept Christ’s invitation to abundant life, especially at a time when the conventional wisdom says that we live in a time of scarcity? Do we choose to redefine what abundant living looks like? Or do we leave it to someone else, maybe the financial markets or retail stores?

Last year, a department store promoted its Christmas merchandise with the slogan, “give the good life.” *Give the good life.* Now I know that this slogan is just marketing people doing their jobs, but even the Grinch who stole Christmas realized that Christmas doesn’t come from a store!” We live the good life...and we do so by investing in the people and projects and institutions that lead to abundant living for all God’s children. And now, more than ever, we look to God to help us decide how to do this.

Prior to coming to Lake Forest, I served Edgewater Presbyterian Church on the north side of Chicago. Edgewater is a small church whose entire budget is less than our heating bill. But it is a thriving church, growing slowly, and its members are lively and faithful. And it is a church that chose to create its own definition of abundant life. One of the stories that keeps the church going through tough times is the memory of the leaders who took bold steps to keep the doors open during the Great Depression.

Edgewater used to be a fancy resort area for wealthy Chicagoans looking to enjoy lakefront living on weekends. In the 1920s, the church raised a great deal of money to build a brand new sanctuary on one side of Bryn Mawr Avenue and a community center on the other side. Just as they completed the rec center, the stock market crashed. Individual members lost everything. The church ran out of money. This was the first of many times when it looked like the church might have to close its doors.

Instead, the elders did something amazing. They mortgaged their own homes. *They mortgaged their own homes* and used the money to keep the church going.

What a mind-shift it must have been for that church. In the hey-day leading up to the Depression, I imagine that they had eagerly anticipated this grand new cathedral that was to be built. I can only guess the pride they felt as they built a recreation center for the neighborhood. But when the church found itself without a lot of “talents” to go around, it forced them to identify what was really important. And it wasn’t the architecture or grandeur of the buildings, but their very existence. The fact that the church witnessed to God’s presence on the corner of Sheridan and Bryn Mawr, was enough. The church members channeled all their enthusiasm for a new campus into turning the existing rec center into a place where God was worshipped and the Word was proclaimed. To this day, the congregation worships in this community center, in a sanctuary intended for community theatre productions. The rest of the building is rented out to tenants whose rent checks allow Edgewater to pay the bills. The elders’ investment lives on.

I wish I could have listened in on the Session discussions about this decision, not to mention the conversations that the elders had with their spouses over the dinner table. I imagine that everything they knew about money management told them that this was a foolish decision. They should look out for their own security. Sock away any money they had managed to retain and live frugally until the crisis was over. No one would have blamed them for asking themselves, “what should I do to protect myself and my family to see us through this financial depression?”

Instead, these elders asked different questions, “how should I live while Christ is away? What should I do with the resources Christ has entrusted to me? What kind of investment should I make with my money? And what kind of return on investment can I expect?” They knew that investing in Edgewater Presbyterian Church would not provide the kind of ROI they had previously enjoyed in the stock market, but they were looking for a different kind of return. This was a church they had already invested in, and had experienced the joy of creating and sustaining a community of faith. They made the choice

to continue investing, because they knew that the reward was there. And this was their testimony about what abundant life looks like in a time of crisis.

A few weeks ago I was a guest speaker in a class on God, Poverty and Wealth at DePaul University. One of the students asked, “how much is too much?” He wanted to know at what point does a person have so much money that they should feel obligated to give the rest away. I fumbled around for a minute, giving a very practical answer about how giving this is personal choice, and we all have the right to meet our own basic needs and provide security for the future. But in the middle of my hemming and hawing, I stopped. And here is what I realized:

“As a Christian,” I said, “I have to trust in God. If I only give because I have money left over once I’ve met my own needs, than I don’t really trust. If I have faith in God, then I want to invest in God’s vision for the world. It’s part of what I am called to do.”

And it’s part of what we are all called to do. We’re not called to simply give money away... we’re called to invest. To invest in God’s church and in God’s people. To invest in a different vision of the world, where the opportunity to live an abundant life doesn’t rise and fall with the Dow. And if any of you have ever invested in this church, I think you share this vision. If you have painted at Neal School, made a casserole for someone returning home from the hospital, or taught Sunday School, you share this vision. If you have prayed for someone in Joys and Concerns or served dinner at the Soup Kitchen, you believe that abundant life is real because you have seen it for yourself. You have, at some point in time, caught a glimpse of the kind of world God desires for us all. If you have given prayerful consideration and made a pledge to the mission and work of this congregation, than you also believe that we live in a world of abundance, not scarcity. And so we all do the Master’s work, until he returns. Amen.