

“Belonging in the World: Gospel Investment Advice”

Matthew 25:14-30

February 23, 2020

It was a few days after Christmas in a darkened theatre in Jefferson City, Missouri. I was sitting next to my younger brother when the previews finally ended. The iconic orchestral score began and the static blue text appeared on the screen, “A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away.” Just like that, we were transported to the living room floor of our childhood home twenty-five years earlier where we piled up blankets, microwaved popcorn, and wore out the VHS tapes of the original Star Wars movies. For two hours, the power of nostalgia took over. We’ve all experienced it—the power of memory summoned by a shared story. There is something about a well-told tale that marks a place in time, draws us together, shakes us out of our preconceptions, and opens us to new possibilities. Stories are one way we make meaning of the world.

Most days, I have the joy of driving our nearly-three-year-old son Benjamin to preschool here at Second. Mornings are not always easy and so Sara and I have developed several strategies to move the process along—a combination of energetic persuasion and ultimatums. But the one guaranteed way to get Ben into the car is to promise to tell the Kitty Story, the ongoing saga of four kitties: Mommy Kitty, Daddy Kitty, Brother Kitty, and Ben Kitty. As long as there is the promise of a story, Ben is ready to go. So, I know the power of story!

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. It was a dark and stormy night. Once upon a time, there was a princess. A sower went out to sow. A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. There was a man who had two sons. And, in this morning’s text, “For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them.”

There are some truths so profound, so close to the heart of reality, that only a story can describe them. And, there are some truths so difficult, so challenging to our assumptions and disruptive of our lives, that we can only hear them packaged in a disarming narrative. This, I believe, is what we have in this morning’s passage from Matthew’s gospel. I think it is among the more provocative stories Jesus ever told. He told it at the end of his own life, as his enemies were conspiring to arrest him. He told it to his disciples—privately, personally, and intentionally.

A man is planning to go on a long journey. He leaves behind significant responsibility, entrusting it to his servants. Could the disciples who heard the story not have known immediately what Jesus meant? That he was the man and they were the servants about to be given major responsibilities? The man summons his servants and distributes his property among them. To one, he gave five talents, to another two talents, and to a third servant he gave one talent—each according to his ability. Then, he went away.

Let me pause here to make clear what would have been obvious to Jesus’ disciples and the parable’s original hearers. A talent is a sum of money—an enormous sum of money—roughly equivalent to twenty years of wages. So, what is being given here is something extremely valuable, certainly far more than any of the servants could have hoped to earn in a lifetime.

The money is given without explanation or direction, perhaps inviting us to consider how we might handle a veritable fortune entrusted to us by our boss. Since this is a parable and since Jesus is the one telling it, we can expect to be surprised. The first two servants wheel, deal, trade, invest and double their talents. The one who received one talent is

cautious and prudent. He's the kind of person you need on the finance committee. A fiscal conservative who is aware he has someone else's resources. The man takes no chances and puts the master's resources away for safekeeping. He's certain that he will return every dime entrusted to him.

The master returns and is delighted with the first two servants. He's lavish with his praise, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Enter into the joy of your master."

Now, wait a minute. When you think about it, that's an odd definition of trustworthiness. After all, you don't double an investment by playing it conservatively. You must be willing to risk it all to collect that kind of return. We might expect the master to say something like, "Well done, courageous slave," "fearless slave," or "very lucky slave." But trustworthy?

That's not the way I think of the word. The trustworthy slave is the third one. The one who is prudent and cautious—the steady and reliable finance committee member. No gain. No losses. Most importantly, no risk. And the response of the master is breathtakingly harsh. You might expect the master to say something like, "Well, ok. You did what you could. You were admirably cautious and respectful of my property." Instead, the response is almost violent: "You wicked, lazy slave—take the money from him and throw him out into the street."

You can imagine the shock of the disciples when Jesus spoke those words. Perhaps, you are feeling the same way this morning. What do we as 21st-century disciples make of this?

Remember, what we have here is a parable. A story meant to open us to deeper understanding and maybe, reconnect us with words we have heard before. For the disciples, the story might call to mind words spoken by Jesus: "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?"

It's the logic of the Gospel that offends our sensibilities and challenges our assumptions. My friend and New Testament professor, Charlie Cousar, called it Gospel investment advice. The first two servants go for broke as they risk it all to invest what the master has given to them. The third servant's prudence is a form of self-protection. That's no way to follow Jesus. Holding back, avoiding risks, being in a constant state of fear—that's no way to live your life.

The kind of world-changing faith to which we are called will always involve some kind of risk. "If you want to save your heart from breaking," C. S. Lewis once said, "don't give it to anyone or anything." If you want to save your heart from breaking, don't give it to anyone. Bury it. What, after all, is more risky than any commitment to a personal, as-long-as-life-lasts relationship? What could be more risky than having children—investing eighteen, nineteen, twenty or more years without any idea of how it's going to turn out? What could be more risky than following your passion—investing all of your time, energy, faith, and resources—with the distinct possibility of failure? What could be more risky than trusting the promise of God and taking the leap of faith? Over and over again on this journey of faith, the temptation is to be prudent: to bury what we've been given and protect what we have. It may not be the most exciting or thrilling way to live, but at least it's safe. The problem with such an approach is that it ignores the call of discipleship. True faith always involves taking a risk if we are to be trustworthy servants of a God who took the ultimate risk for us—losing his life in order to redeem our living.

I've said from this pulpit before that the most important question for any disciple of Jesus and any community of faith this one: *what time is it?* Those first two servants sensed something that escaped the third one. The moment was right to take a risk. It was time to cast off the fear that argues for self-protection and cautious control. It was time to put trust to the test.

And what about us? What time is it in our lives? What time is at Second Presbyterian Church? What

time is it in our community? Might I suggest that you answered that question in part when you called a thirty-five-year-old pastor with less than a decade of ordained experience to serve and lead this great church filled with storied tradition. It's the kind of risk that signifies bold faith in a God who holds the future as firmly as the past. It's the kind of trust that leads a church to make use of the tremendous resources of past faithfulness in order to invest in future ministry. It's the kind of trust that has the firm conviction that God is faithful and that what we do here matters. It's the kind of hope that calls us to reach, to stretch, to grow, to move beyond ourselves and into transformative faith. It's the sign of a people who are convinced that God is on the move and we should be too.

Gospel investment advice: don't play it safe. Don't be content with lives of quiet desperation and no sense of adventurous faith. Model your living on the action of a God who took a risk and invested so much *in us!* Here's the basic question: what are we going to do with what we have been given? Jesus could not be clearer. If we choose to bury what we have and live cautiously in the months and years ahead, then we know exactly what will happen. No gains, no losses, no risks, no surprises. But there's no telling what might happen if you take the risk of investing your life in Christ. There's no telling what might happen if we take a leap of faith into an unknown future. All we know is that we will be living by faith in a God of surprises. I'd say it's worth the risk. Amen.