

(Mat 25:14-30 NRSV)

¹⁴ "For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; ¹⁵ to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. ¹⁶ The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. ¹⁷ In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. ¹⁸ But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

¹⁹ After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them.

²⁰ Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.' ²¹ His master said to him, '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.' ²² And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.' ²³ His master said to him, '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.'

²⁴ Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; ²⁵ so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' ²⁶ But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? ²⁷ Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest.'

²⁸ So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

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Safety, Daring and the Kingdom of God

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Text: Matthew 25:14-30

Can't you see he's scared? Can't you tell he's frightened to death? Can't you see he's doing the best he can. Leave him alone, for crying out loud!

When I watch sports or movies or read stories, I'm afraid my imagination gets the better of me. My kids used to get embarrassed when it happened. My wife still tells me to be quiet. Because, all of a sudden I jump into the plot. One minute I'm sitting calmly on the couch, and the next I'll be screaming at the quarterback, "He's open. He's open. Can't you see the tight end? What's the matter with you. For cryin' out loud!" And Glon would holler, "Dad, Dad, calm down. Quit being a disgrace. You're on the couch dad. They're a thousand miles away, Dad. They can't hear you." But his ridicule didn't make a difference for long. Pretty soon one of those thrillers the kids like would be on TV. The bad guy is hiding behind some wall or something. And along comes this innocent walking right into the mouth of danger. And I can't stand it anymore. I start yelling, "look out! Don't go there! Look out! Look out!" And the kids would roll their eyes and say, "Hey, Dad, why don't you go lie down awhile. You'll be okay after a bit." And then they would look at each other and make signs that indicated I was out of my mind.

Well, anyway, it happened again just this week, when I read this morning's scripture passage, the story of the bank president and the three employees. The bank president needs to be away for several months setting up international operations in the newly opened Chinese finance market. Before she goes, she calls in three employees. (You all recognize this story, don't you?) anyway the bank president is going to be away, and she says, "I'm going to be away for several months, and I need you three to manage the assets while I'm gone. So, she put the first employee, whom she trusted greatly, in charge of commercial loans. The second employee, she also trusted a good deal. She put her in charge of residential mortgages. And the third employee. . . Well, the third employee was a very uncertain and nervous sort of person, and a brand new employee. And the bank president looked at him and said, "You, number three, I put you in charge of car loans."

Well, the months went by. Indeed, they turned into years. And in the meantime, the man in charge of commercial loans made a killing on investment in the third harbor tunnel and the depressed artery project. And the woman set over residential mortgages made many wise decisions in the high flying Boston housing market, and she increased the banks solid portfolio enormously. And number three. Well number three became very anxious about the car loan market. First there was the problem of gas prices, and number three thought maybe they would

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go up and then the gas guzzlers he financed would be worthless. On the other hand, maybe gas prices would go down, and everyone would want to get rid of all those little cars, and he'd get stuck holding a bag full of compact car loans. And then there was the problem with the economy. If the economy went sour, then he would have a ton of defaults on the car loans, and with a weak economy nobody would pay a good price for the repossessed automobiles. Once again he would lose money. Finally, the car loan guy decided to take all the bank's money out of car loans, and he took it home and put it under his mattress.

And when the president returned, she called them all into her office and asked, "Well, tell me, how well did you manage the bank while I was gone?" And the man in charge of commercial loans told how he had capitalized the tunnel and artery projects. And then he showed her a stunning Excel spreadsheet. He had doubled the assets. The president was aglow. She said, "commercial loan man, you shall always be at my right hand." And so, too, it went the home mortgage woman. For she also had doubled the assets of her division. And the president, smiling even more, said, "Oh, what a team. You both will be with me forever!" And then number three stepped forward, a bit shaky as a speaker, and also not very accomplished in the art of buttering up the boss, and said, "Well, I know you are hard to please and easy to anger, and the car market is ever a hard thing to judge. And I surely did not want to lose your money. So, I took the bank out of the auto loan business. I put the money under my mattress. And here it is, every penny." And the president was livid. She said, "You did what? You took us out of the car loan business? You put the money under your mattress? You idiot. Here, give me that money. Maybe there's still time to invest it in the big dig. And, now, get out of my sight you worthless moron."

This is the point where I jumped into the story. I vaulted right there in front of the bank president, chin to chin with this formidable woman of business, and I said, "Can't you see he's scared? Can't you tell he's frightened to death? Can't you see he's doing the best he can. Leave him alone, for crying out loud! Those other two were just lucky, you know. At the bank down the street one guy invested a bundle in Enron and another guy put everything in tech stocks. How smart do you think they look? It's risky out there. Your wild betting sidekicks just hit it lucky." I stopped my tirade. I looked around sheepishly. Glon hasn't lived at home for many years, but I had this sense that he was right there looking at me exasperated and disgusted, "Cut it out Dad," I imagined him to say. "Can't you even read the bible without jumping into the story and bothering the characters?"

And I thought, "No, I guess I can't."

But why? But why did I find myself jumping into this story? Why did the bank president, a.k.a. God, bother me so much here?

I guess the answer is that I saw a lot of you and me in number three. This story, whether Matthew's version of it or my paraphrase, this story seems to be about God's expectations of us, and those expectations seem to be to make it big by taking wild and crazy bets. And the story seems to say that those who have the greatest privileges will get richer, while those who have the least will get less.

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And it is here that I couldn't control myself from jumping into the story. First, the risks in the story are simply unreasonable. And second, even in that part makes sense, God trusted those who had all the advantages of skill and place. It says in the very beginning that the overseers were given in charge according to their ability, that is, according to the advantage of education, wealth, training, and experience. And at the end comes this sentence, "For to everyone who has will more be given, and that one will have abundance; but from the one who has nothing, even that will be taken away." And I find myself dumbfounded when I imagine these words belonging to God, God whom I took to be advocate for the poor, the down and out, the insecure.

And if this is a story about us, you and me, if this is a story about you and me and our relationship with God, and if it is a story about our ability to handle God's accounts or to handle our own lives, lets be honest, with whom do you most identify? Do you think of yourself as the brave, self-assured, full of confidence one, risking wildly, succeeding always? Do you think of yourself as the one who, with utter poise, can take charge of God's property or your own life and hardly thinking about it double its value? Or do you find yourself somewhat overwhelmed by the task? Do you find yourself thinking, like good ole number three, if I can just keep things from falling apart, I will have done well?

As we have worked together over the years in this place, I have certainly heard it asked. I have heard it asked, "Can we make it?" Sometimes it has been a question in the middle of life crises. When jobs have gone sour or evaporated, when long held dreams have been stolen away, when our very sense of who we are is pulled out from under us, when sickness has robbed the talents by which we've lived and defined ourselves, and when death breaks our hearts, we often ask, "Can we make it?" And I have heard it asked around the table at the committee meeting when we look at the stark figures of the finances, and then at expenses: programs, salaries, and a huge church building constantly in need of so much work. I have heard it asked, "Can we make it? Can we survive?"

And those questions have been asked by faithful people. They have been asked by hard-working people, struggling to handle and juggle a great deal. They have been asked by people working against difficult odds, who weren't at all sure that even survival could be had. And I resent the tone of this morning's passage when it suggests that those who have struggled just to keep things afloat are worthless morons. So that's why I jumped into the middle of the story and went chin to chin with the bank president.

Now, all that said. Now, having expressed some considerable resentment towards the story, and now having acknowledged that we all know places where it seems that just surviving is enough and maybe even that it is more than we can manage, now having identified with the third servant, where it seems that putting whatever we do have under the mattress and trying to preserve at least that much is enough to do, now all that said and recognized, does this story have anything to say to us?

I think it does. I would have been far happier had the story had more compassion for number three. I don't think he should have been called a worthless moron. I would have liked to see more understanding for his situation, which after all was, no doubt, the situation the passage

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was written for in the first place. But then, maybe, that was meant to shock us into seeing that the story isn't really about investment banking, but about our own life situations. Maybe God's reaction is so uncharacteristic so incongruent to let us know that our situation with God is wholly incongruent with our normal sense of fear and risk and reward.

The early church was in a quest just to survive. It felt the very same way that number three did. Many days, against the persecution, against their tiny size, against the powers of Rome, it must have seemed that to protect, to preserve that given in their charge was quite simply satisfactory.

But the writer of Matthew spoke another view within that fledgling organization. The writer of this morning's story knew that if the only goal was survival, then probably not even that would happen. To structure themselves merely to survive, ironically was to insure their failure.

This story was to encourage people of the early church to believe beyond themselves. It was, and is, to say, that there are reasons we feel we can only survive. They are real. Many times the burdens are heavy and the ways difficult. It is fair enough to say that straight out. Most of us know the fear of failure and the desire to hang onto what we have got. We have learned it from our every day life.

The interesting thing about this morning's passage is that it is lousy banking advice. Of course, bankers don't put the money under a mattress. But they invest cautiously, for the failure they fear is a real possibility. And every time banks have gotten into trouble, every time they have extended too many risky loans, every time they have thought a bull market could never end, every time they have tried to get too greedy, the economy has slapped them on the wrists. And when that has happened the speculative bankers have not been rewarded. They have been berated.

But today's story is not about banking. It is not about common sense investing. In fact, the very outrageousness of this morning's story is meant to demonstrate just how outlandish is the kingdom of God. God's economy is not business economy. God's investing strategy is not investment banking investment strategy. In God's economy the risk is standing still. In God's economy the risk is allowing your fears to make your decisions. In God's economy investing wildly in your faith is always a good long term and short term investment strategy.

In God's economy there is no such thing as survival, no such thing as standing still. Things go up or down. And unfortunately, when we try to make them stand still, to preserve what we have, when we put our talents, our hopes, our love, our effort, our gifts from God under the mattress in order to keep them, they dry up, they become thin and anemic.

This story urges us out of a survival mode. This story urges you to invest extravagantly those gifts which God has given you. What ministry do you want to do in this place? I want you to ask yourself that question. What gift and passion has God given you that is just waiting to be taken out from hiding? This is an easy place to do it. In last month's newsletter I mentioned the idea of ministry teams. It's as simple as getting two or three of you together that do something you feel inspired to do. Is it risky to try something like that? I understand you might be a bit hesitant, even a bit fearful. But there are two things you need to know. If that thing doesn't take

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off, it doesn't make any difference. Just try something else. There are plenty of ministries God will bless. And that's the second thing to know. God is lavish. You may be surprised, utterly stunned by what amazing things grow out of your ministry efforts.

So, what ministry do you want to do in this place? And if you can't quite decide or figure it out, talk with me or Tom or Linda. Maybe we can help. I've got a hundred ideas, and I'm glad to share them with you, but I would rather you thought about what you feel called to do first. Your ideas are bound to be better than mine. But here are just a few. Maybe you want to start a group. It could be a support group about something in your life. It could be a reading group. It could be a spirituality group that decides to build a labyrinth for the congregation. Who knows? Or maybe some of you would organize the church's involvement in the Little Brother/Little Sister program, or try an after school program for local children whose parents work, or ESL classes that even some of the people in the Brazilian Church might find very helpful. Maybe you would put together a music ensemble or organize lay members to play pieces for the worship service. Maybe you would involve the church in some concern that is deep in your heart like Open and Affirming, or housing and homelessness, or family violence.

The point is this. There is something inside of you waiting to be cultivated, invested, let free, something inside of you that God wants to grow like a weed. And it is true that when God looks upon it and God looks upon you, God will be pleased, not only for that part of the Kingdom you have helped to build, but for that part of the Kingdom that has multiplied within you. May God's lavish abundance take you right off your feet. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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