

*A Sound Investment*  
Matthew 25:14-30  
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November 16, 2014

This week I received an alert on my iPhone that I was due for an update – you know, that little round red circle with a number in it, that waits there until you do something about it. I find these at best mildly irritating. I'm skeptical, and I don't want to change again – I want to keep things just the way they are, so I wait. I wait, and wait, and wait, ignoring the little red icon announcing that I'm out-of-date, imploring me to download and invest in the new system. It's a small risk, but I just avoid taking it as long as possible. Well, I had some extra time, and I decided to go for it. I clicked on the download, and after an hour or so, my phone was reconfigured and I had a bunch of new capabilities that I didn't have before – the little emoji pictures that I love, an app for health connection, which can show whomever finds my phone my allergies and important health data, should I so desire to fill it in, and upgrades like this. I was given this small gift from Apple, I made a minor investment of my time, and I was instantly upgraded.

The gospel text today is about making the investment and experiencing the upgrades. It's about risk and reward.

In the Matthew passage, a man leaves to go on a trip and entrusts his servants with his property. He gives according to ability, that is to say, what he felt each was capable of handling. He apparently provides no instructions, but gives each the freedom to do with the property as each sees fit. The amount bestowed was a unit of money called a "talent," which was worth more than 15 years of earnings for a day laborer. It has been noted that the modern understanding of talent as a special ability or aptitude was derived from this very passage. The man gives 5 talents, or 75 years worth of wages, to one servant; 2 talents, or 30 years wages to the second; and 1 talent, or 15 years of wages to the third. After a very long time, the man returns and seeks to settle the accounts, and find out what has been done with the investments. How did each use the money? The first two traded and doubled their investments, and the third dug a hole and hid it in the ground.

Now, I have to admit to you, when I first read the passage, I thought that third man was rather smart and prudent. I thought he was wise because he didn't *waste* what was given to him. I mean, what about an economic downturn? This guy was playing it safe, and should he really be punished for that? He didn't lose it! He's frugal! I was taught this is a virtue! So why the name-calling, the banishment, the weeping and gnashing of teeth?

Let's start by looking at the context of the passage. The passage is part of what is known as Matthew's Eschatological Discourse, chapters 24 and 25. These are parables and instructions about judgment. Early Christian belief was that Christ would imminently return again as the heavenly judge at the end of time (what is known as the parousia, or second-coming of Christ). The book of Matthew was likely written sometime between 80-110AD, and since Christ had not yet returned, Matthew's gospel incorporates this delay. Thus, the master in the parable read today, allegorically, or symbolically, is meant to represent Jesus, the Son of Man. The slaves entrusted

with the talents symbolize members of the church. The departure of the master on his trip points to Jesus' ascension to the Father. The return can be said to be the parousia, where Christ returns as the heavenly judge, to see just what his servants have been doing during his time away, how they've been advancing God's kingdom.

So in this context, when we look at the 3<sup>rd</sup> servant, he says to the master upon his return, "I knew you were a harsh man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed. I was afraid, and so I hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours." If we consider this is Jesus Christ he is talking to, and not a situation of economic downturn, we see things a bit differently. We see this 3<sup>rd</sup> servant's concept of God, and how he behaves accordingly. God to him is a harsh master whom he blames.

There is a psychological construct that says our thoughts evoke our feelings, which generate our actions. In this case, the 3<sup>rd</sup> servant thinks God is harsh, which evokes feelings of fear, which cause him to go hide the gift. Perhaps he thinks God is asking for more than what the servant deems possible. "Hey, he thinks, I can only handle so much!" We don't know if the servant is aware that his colleague was entrusted with 5 times more, but perhaps that would have been too much pressure for this one, perhaps that's why God gave him just the one talent. Maybe he's resentful about this, and so buries it out of spite.

There's also a self-pity, a shame, a vulnerability, that this one seems to carry, an unworthiness. Is he afraid he will lose it? Maybe he doesn't trust himself, that he could do something respectable with it. He doubts himself. Or does he just not care enough? Perhaps he has other things to do that he thinks are more important than investing the money that had been invested in him? ("I was extremely busy! I didn't have time to go to the bank!") Or maybe he doesn't trust this harsh God -- he's wary, suspicious about why God would give him the care of this capital.

Prominent Presbyterian pastor and *Christian Century* editor John Buchanan writes, "The greatest risk of all, it turns out, is not to risk anything, not to care deeply and profoundly enough about anything to invest deeply, to give your heart away and in the process risk everything. The greatest risk of all, it turns out, is to play it safe, to live cautiously and prudently -- to not care, not love, not rejoice, not live up to the full potential of our humanity, playing it safe, investing nothing."

This accurately describes the 3<sup>rd</sup> servant, playing it safe. Well, can you blame him? Life is risky! Caring deeply is risky! Loving is risky. I took my eldest son, Charlie, to college 2 months ago. It was so heart-breakingly painful because I had invested everything in him, and then one day, I dropped him off and drove away. The day before I took him to college I overheard a mother talking to her toddler. "You have to stay where I can see you!" she said. I spent 18 years making sure he stayed where I could see him, and then in an instant, he was gone. My husband keeps reminding me not to say that I've lost a son. But truth is, it feels that way. He doesn't call, doesn't write, and I know I should be happy about this, but I miss his voice. We went to parents' weekend last month and after I said good-bye (again), I cried all the way to Palo Alto and I said aloud, through the sobs, "I almost wish I never had children, because this is just so hard." I felt tricked by God. I felt like God had given me the greatest gift, and I invested it, and then one day was no longer allowed to receive the dividends.

I was discussing this experience with a professor at SFTS, Dr. Eugene Park (a deeply and profoundly reverent man), and he in turn shared with me the experience of the recent death of his mother. He said this: "Stephanie, I am starting to think that life is a series of letting go of what we love the most. And when we have let go of every last thing of which we hold dear, then perhaps, we will see the face of God."

I thought about the gift I was given, my investment, and how I had to release it, to share it with the world. Holding on to it, clinging to it, would be unhealthy for everybody. By letting it go, I could experience the true joy of giving, which in itself, is the dividend.

The first two servants in the parable don't hoard the treasures, they don't store them up in hostility or fear of loss -- they immediately let them go, they share them, and the treasures are multiplied. They recognize that the talents are not theirs to begin with, that all the blessings and advantages that they have, and all that they are, come from the good Lord. Consequently, they are accountable to the Lord for their use of them and for their proliferation. And it is with this joy of acknowledgment, this freedom of having been so greatly blessed, and having shared the blessing with others, that they are ready to settle their accounts when the Lord returns. They know they have acted with a single eye to their master's advantage, and so they joyfully submit to his inspection, where their honesty and fidelity are clearly made manifest.

When the master returns, they excitedly run up and present their investments and bonuses. "Well done, good and trustworthy slave!" the master says. "You have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things! Enter into the joy of your master!" Unlike the 3<sup>rd</sup> servant who claims his master to be harsh and reaping where he does not sow, these two servants recognize generosity when they see it, and they get to share and live in the joy.

Rev. Charles Hoffacker observes, "Finding themselves at the receiving end of such outrageous trust, they feel empowered, and are willing to take risks of their own. The love their master has shown them overcomes their fear of failure." Indeed, God takes a risk by entrusting us with such abundance, and what a privilege and honor to be the beholders of such faith and goodness. Would it be that we, too, could overcome our fear of failure with the acknowledgment that God loves and values and trusts us with the gifts we are so freely given.

One commentator wondered, "What would have happened if the first two had lost their talents in the trade?" Would the master have still said, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave, enter into the joy of your master?" I can say, wholeheartedly and emphatically, yes. The point of the parable is, there is no loss when you give unto the Lord. The parable gives us a guarantee -- God invests in us, and when we in turn invest in others, the investment multiplies. It is always worth more than the original investment. Whatever we've been given, we can use for the glory of God.

The Marin Interfaith Council sponsored a movie in the Mill Valley Film Festival last month, called "States of Grace." The movie is about a woman named Grace, who lives at the Zen Center at Slide Ranch. Grace is an 8<sup>th</sup> generation physician -- she started the first AIDS clinic in San Francisco at Laguna Honda hospital in the 80s. The movie begins with her acceptance of an award for service by the Dalai Lama. It then skips ahead 20 years, when she is in a head-on collision on the Golden Gate Bridge. After a 48-day coma, brain bleeds and 9 surgeries, Grace

miraculously regains consciousness with her cognitive abilities intact. Her body, however, is left shattered and severely disabled. For 2.5 years, she is completely dependent upon her former long-term partner and co-parent of their disabled adopted daughter. We witness their resilience, triumphs and setbacks along the way, as Grace learns to feed herself, to walk, to get in and out of her wheelchair. At the end of the movie, 3 years after the accident, Grace is able to take her wheelchair in a van that drives her to Laguna Honda, and she starts a pain clinic there. "What better person to help people with their chronic pain, than me?" she says, and the movie zooms in on her treating patients as she motors around them in her wheelchair.

After the movie, my friend and I cautiously and reluctantly admitted that we didn't think we would have the will to live under those circumstances, as Grace had. We would be more likely to hide and just slowly fade away. This was an extraordinary case of someone making use of what little they seemed to have to give, and yet throughout, God kept multiplying the gift. Did she find joy in being part of a head-on collision requiring years of surgeries and physical therapy? No. Did she find joy in using her circumstances to help others? Yes. Whatever we've been given, we can use in service to God through Christ. God has blessed us to be a blessing.

The master says to the 3<sup>rd</sup> servant, "You think I'm harsh and reap where I do not sow? Surely he's thinking: I invested in YOU! I gave you life! You think I'm not sowing? And you're going to dig a hole and bury the gift?" God shows us through Jesus Christ that God refuses to be buried and stay down. God wants to be out, moving, connecting, loving, healing, helping, saving, witnessing, caring, expanding, growing, changing, progressing and upgrading.

If our actions, and our hearts, show that we truly recognize and are thankful for our God given gifts, then we won't hesitate to go out and boldly use them for God's glory and the ultimate benefit of God's kingdom here on earth. If you are considering making a substantial commitment with the time, talents, or treasures that God has given you, ask yourself, is it going to help advance the kingdom of God? And if the answer is yes, then go for it. It's a sound investment.