

Matthew 25:14-30

FOR REFLECTION

"He who is not courageous enough to take risks will accomplish nothing in life."

~ Muhammad Ali, American Athlete, Heavyweight Boxing Champion (1942-2016)

"The biggest risk is not taking any risk... In a world that changing really quickly, the only strategy that is guaranteed to fail is not taking risks."

~ Mark Zuckerberg, American Businessman, Co-founder of Facebook (b.1984)

Trust and Risk

I have no idea why this rich slave-holder decided to entrust three slaves with a fortune in silver.

5 talents – 30,000 silver coins

2 talents – 12,000 silver coins

1 talent – 6,000 silver coins – 20 year's wages for common laborer

Usually people with money work to get more money – so the incentive must have been using slave labor to increase his wealth. The amount of wealth given to each one indicates, perhaps, levels of trust with each of the people involved. Even so, each one has a staggering amount of money to work with.

The first two made business deals that doubled the money in trust. The third didn't trust his master, feared him (for good reason) and didn't like the way he made his money. So, he buried his entrusted funds against the master's return. The first two are rewarded, the third is punished and his funds given to the one who has the most to start with.

The listener's expectations are turned upside down. One would expect that Jesus would have the underdog come out on top. Didn't happen. The slaves who imitate the greedy master are labeled "good and trustworthy" and rewarded with more; the slave who was careful and took no risks with what was entrusted to him is labeled "wicked and lazy" and stripped of everything.

This parable is in the context of a long, private session with the disciples – after any number of descriptions of what will happen in the end times before Christ comes again. Most of this portion of Matthew is created by Matthew. He wrote for an audience after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans, after the Christians were expelled from Judaism by orthodox leaders, people waiting impatiently for Christ to

return and end their suffering. The inference here is that G-d's reign is like this parable. And this seems odd to me.

The existence of this text DOES explain why more literalistic, so-called "Christian" members of congress believe the new tax reform bill is justified. Non-productive members of society deserve to have what little they have taken from them, producers deserve it all. It's right here in the Gospels.

If this parable was told, however, to describe the reality of the economic system in the Roman Empire (much like ours under this administration) – then, perhaps, Jesus was hoping to inspire the anger of the common person. Perhaps he was stirring up resistance, even rebellion against the ruling classes. It would explain his execution by the ruling classes.

On the other hand, if this is a description of G-d's expectations about the resources left entrusted to humans (Jewish/Christians in particular), what might these outcomes say about trust and risk in life in general?

We can interpret this as a justification for generously using the natural resources of the planet. It has been given to us and to not use it for it's full benefit to human society is a shame. Or, conversely, this could be interpreted as a call to arms – to save the planet before it is completely used up and we are relegated to eternal darkness. We are called to be stewards, not exploiters of these natural gifts.

There is an ongoing conversation in this Beloved Community about the money entrusted to us by previous generations. We have it invested – earning interest. So at least it's not in the ground doing nothing. But there are strong feelings about how that money should be treated.

* Some say we need to save it and cultivate it, be frugal in our regular expenses – making sure we have enough should we decide to buy another church facility – or just to make sure we have enough to survive for many years to come. It is certainly the prudent thing to do.

* Some say that we need to invest in this community to keep it healthy and well-bonded – to keep us from drifting apart from one another. If we don't know and value one another, why keep this thing going?

* And some say we need to take risks and invest in the greatest needs of our community and the world, making a difference now for people who are suffering – even if it means this particular church does not have resources left for the duration. Why continue to exist if we are not transforming society in the image of G-d's realm?

Two Sundays ago, I cast a vote at my home church in Pasadena to sell the building. I cast it with tears in my eyes and a surprising amount of grief. I grew up there, I experienced a youth group 40 strong in that building, we had sleep overs, plotted

rebellions against tradition, planned youth worship that shocked our elders, shared poems and songs that we had composed, learned about faith and community and social justice, roller skated in the basement, slept over in the classrooms, mingled with all generations during coffee hour. This church helped to raise me, sponsored me in seminary, hosted my ordination, baptized my son and my mother, and continues to be a part of our family village. But the building was killing the Beloved Community. It had to go to save the village.

And now the debate will begin: do we bury or invest the money, use it for building up the congregation, use it to transform the world? Do we take risks or be cautious in this crazy world?

These conversations about trust and risk and property and money are not new, by any means. My great-grandfather, Joseph Appley, and great-grandmother, Jessie Moore Appley, were Methodist ministers in Basking Ridge, New Jersey at the turn of the last century. He was ordained, she was licensed to work with the women of the congregation. His greatest feat and biggest controversy was his fund-raising – and the building of a new church edifice. I wonder if, now, the biggest controversy is whether to repair or sell.

Jesus did not attach himself to buildings, synagogues or store-fronts. He promoted voluntary poverty and living and working with his working-class disciples. But there WAS money involved. Wealthy people funded his ministry, Mary of Magdala being one of them. And he lived on the generosity of people who shared what they had. I'm guessing there might have been some controversy over his unwillingness to pay his own way.

And then there was the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by the Romans in 70 CE. In the year 66 CE the Jews of Judea rebelled against their Roman masters. In response, the Emperor Nero dispatched an army under the generalship of Vespasian to restore order. That was the end of their beloved edifice and its contents – a violation of its significance. And it was the beginning of a time of enforcing orthodoxy – expelling Jewish Christians who were anything BUT orthodox. And it was Matthew's time to rewrite the stories that we retell today.

So, edifice or ministry? Or edifice to facilitate ministry?

Invest with the bank and save? Or invest in people and build community? Or invest in society and help save the world? Or all three?

With what have we been entrusted, and do we risk it and for what purpose?

Do we use "evil" capitalism to increase our resources in order to do good in the world?

Or do we separate our resources from the economic system and do what good we can here and now?

The parable doesn't tell us what to do. It raises questions and makes us think about what is right and wrong and questionable at any given time in history.

This is our time in history.

What are our choices – personally and as a non-profit organization?

What does G-d expect from us?

Scripture Reading for Sunday November 19, 2017 – Pentecost 24 – Year A

Matthew 25:14-30

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.'

*pink