

Rev. Dr. Alan Meyers
“Investing in the Gospel; or, On Not Playing it Safe”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, November 15, 2020

I Thessalonians 5:1-11

Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When they say, ‘There is peace and security’, then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labour pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then, let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

Matthew 25:14-30

‘For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. 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.” 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.” 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.” 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.” 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; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.” 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? 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. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. 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. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Shall we pray together? Lord, speak your word to us now. Let your holy spirit make our minds and hearts alert and able to hear what you have to say to us. And help us to respond to your word with our faith and our obedience through Jesus, the living word, amen.

Once again, good morning. I'm so happy to be here with you, with some of you right here in the sanctuary, and I trust, with a lot more of you out there. It's so good to be together, even in these days. We're together by the power of the Internet, and even more important, in the power of the Holy Spirit. So, it is good to be with you.

Wow! There are a lot of things in the Bible that are scary, we must admit. But I don't think there's anything scarier than these words from our reading from the Gospel of Matthew this morning, where the master in the story says, "As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." The writer of The Gospel of Matthew likes this phrase, "weeping and gnashing of teeth." There are several parables like this one in which someone is thrown into the outer darkness where there's weeping and gnashing of teeth. One of my professors in seminary, Bruce Metzger, told us the story of a waggish friend of his who claimed to have found the manuscript of The New Testament, in which, when Jesus uses this phrase, "weeping and gnashing of teeth," one of his disciples says, "But master, what if a man has no teeth?" Then Jesus replies, "Teeth will be provided." I can't see you, but I hope you're laughing. Well, whether or not teeth will be provided, I like what Dirk Lang, a Lutheran preacher, has said about this parable of the talents. Lang says, "The real key phrase in this parable is not the one at the end about the weeping and gnashing of teeth. No, the real key phrase, the real thing this story is about, is that other phrase, "enter into the joy of your master"." That's what the master says to the first two servants. He says, "Enter into the joy of your master."

This story is about how to enter into the joy of our master, the joy that our master, God, intends for us to have. God wants us to have joy. God sent us Jesus to lead us out of misery into true joy. To turn away from our master's joy, to refuse it, would be horrible. It would be to miss the point of life altogether. It would be like being thrown into the outer darkness. How do we enter into the joy of our master? That's what this parable tells us. Let's look again at the story. Jesus says, "A man, obviously a very wealthy man, goes away on a journey, and he leaves his property to be cared for while he's away by three servants of his. To one servant, he entrusts five talents." The word talent, as it's used here, means a lot of money. A talent, in those days, was worth about fifteen years wages of a laborer. So, this is a huge amount which he trusts the first servant with. The master gives the second servant two talents to care for. And finally, the master leaves the third servant with one talent. The master is away a long time. And while he's away, the first two servants each invest his money and they make lots more money. But the third servant buries the money he was left with in the ground. He does nothing with it, just buries it to keep it safe, to avoid risking it, to keep from possibly losing it. When the master comes back, he is delighted with what the first two servants have done with his money. He says to each of them, "Well done good and trustworthy servant. You have been trustworthy in a few things. I will put you in charge of many things. Enter into the joy of your master." But he is very displeased with what the third servant has done-- or rather has not done. The master says, "You wicked and lazy slave. You ought to have at least invested my money with the bankers and, on my return, I would have received what was my own with interest." That third servant does not enter into the joy of his master, and we know what happened to him according to Matthew.

What exactly is the point that Jesus is making in this parable of the talents? Although I've heard people actually suggest this, first of all, I'm pretty sure this story is not intended as a blessing on capitalism. It's not, finally, really about money and how to increase your material wealth through shrewd investments. If you want to, look me up sometime and we'll argue about this. But I don't think that's what it's really all about. It's about much more than that. The parable is about life in general. I think it's about how life in general and every good thing in life is a gift from God. And we are to use our gifts, not just sit on them or bury them in the ground. We are to use our gifts in good ways, ways that are in tune with God's will for us. If we use our gifts rightly, the good in those gifts will grow and produce more good as invested money may grow and produce more money.

If you have been given a healthy body, don't just sit around idly. Exercise that body and take care of it. Use it in healthy ways that will make you stronger and happier and may lengthen your life. If I refuse unnecessarily to go out and walk or jog because I'm afraid I'll get hurt, if I don't want to take the risk of maybe turning my ankle or something and so I don't go out, well, I may be safe from that kind of harm but I won't get the benefits of exercise. I'll be like the third servant burying what I have been given in the ground, so to speak, to keep it safe and losing all that I might have gained. If you have been given a mind, use that mind. Learn all you can about subjects you find interesting and maybe practical too. If you use your mind, your knowledge and your intellectual powers will grow, your life will be fuller and richer I used to teach college students and I was frequently saddened by students who would not think. I had a student once who actually complained. It came back to me through a third party. Complained, "Dr. Meyers wants us to think." I had students who resisted learning anything new. Especially, things they found disturbing, things that were in conflict with what they had thought or believed before. They would not take the risk of even entertaining new ideas. They would not use the intellectual gifts God gave them, and so they refused from laziness and maybe from fear. They refused to that extent to enter into the joy of their Master. We need to use the gifts God gave us including gifts of personal abilities or talents. Our English word, talent, meaning a natural aptitude or capacity that a person may have, that word comes from, is derived from, this very parable that we're thinking about today. Our personal gifts, as we say, our personal gifts for music or for baseball or for cooking or whatever, our particular personal gifts are called talents because God has entrusted them to us like the master in the parable entrusted those talents to the three servants. And like the master in the parable, God would like us to make those talents grow by using them. God wants us to take the risks involved in using our gifts and improving them.

What if I give a piano recital and I don't do well, and the people laugh at me? What if I tried cooking something new for the first time and it comes out terrible? We need to be willing to take that kind of risk. If we live our lives like the third servant in the parable did, never taking risks, we will come to the end of our lives empty and regretful. It may even feel like the outer darkness where we weep and gnash our teeth. To invest in life, to go ahead and take the risk of using our good gifts in hopes of creating more good with them, this is to enter into the joy of our Master. Into God's own joy. It's God's own joy. See, because this is what God himself has done in creating the world. In the beginning, there's just God. But then God goes out of God's own self and creates something that's not God. God takes the risk of creating you and me, beings whom God can love, being whom God creates also to return God's love by loving God and loving one another.

In creating the world, God risks rejection. And so, we do, and we do reject God. This is called sin. We reject God. We turn away from our Creator and our Creator's will for us. But then God takes another unspeakable, inexpressible risk. God sends God's only son into the world to redeem it, to bring it back to himself. God takes risks. Kind of like

the master in the parable took a risk leaving so much of his money with those three servants. But the master in the parable expected his servants to do what he did, to risk investing what they had so as to make it grow. And so we, you and I, servants of God, we are invited to do what God does, to use God's gifts in love, in the service of God and of one another, in the faith and the hope that the good God intended in creating the world will grow to the glory of God. To refuse to do this is to run away from God. And to run away from God is to run away from life. And it's to risk winding up in that outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

God has given us all the good things we have, and God invites us to use every gift in God's service. But when Jesus tells us this parable, I think he's thinking of one great gift in particular. I think the gift Jesus is thinking of is the gospel, the good news from God, which God expressed in Jesus Christ himself. In Jesus, in his life of loving service, in obedience to God, in his dying love on the cross, in his resurrection from the dead, we see the victory of God's love over all that opposes it. We see God's victory over hatred, over cruelty, over injustice, over everything that opposes love. In Jesus, we come to know that God loves us, and God loves the world so much that he gave his only son for us. And so, we are assured of the final victory of love, the final coming of God's kingdom that will rule in the whole world in all it is. We don't know when that is coming, but it is coming. We are assured of that. That's what our other scripture reading for the day is about, of course, reading from First Thessalonians 5. It's about the day of the Lord. The day of God's final victory. We read a lot about that in the electioneering readings for these last few Sundays of the church year and in the Advent season that will begin the last Sunday of this month.

We are entrusted with the gospel, with the good news. Trusted to invest it so it can grow. We're not supposed to bury it in the ground. We're not supposed to just listen to the good news and then forget it. We're not supposed to just hear the gospel and then not do anything about it. We're supposed to respond in joy, in faith and hope and love, in everything we say and in everything we do. We're called to tell the good news of God's love to the world by our words and by our loving deeds. May it be so for us. May we hear our Lord say to us, "Well done, good and trustworthy servant." And may we enter into the joy of our master. Amen.