

First Presbyterian Church  
Bozeman, Montana  
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November 15, 2020  
*33<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time*  
Matthew 25:14-30

### Called to be Shrewd Investors

One of the challenges of Biblical preaching in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is striking a balance between speaking to those who are mature in the faith—those who have been immersed in the scriptures for many years—and at the same time to those who are new or relatively new to the faith—those who are just getting their feet wet as they step into the wonderful world of the Bible. The challenge is to both teach the stories—the content if you will—of the Bible, while at the same time expounding on those stories to connect with the lives of those listening. Sometimes that challenge is greater when the part of the Bible being addressed is more obscure and less well known. And sometimes the challenge is not as great because of how a particular scripture passage or idea is more generally known sometimes even beyond the confines of the Christian faith. The parable of the Good Samaritan comes to mind as one that has taken on meaning outside of the faith as well as inside it. A Good Samaritan is one who goes above and beyond the minimum expectation to help someone in need. That is well known by both those inside as well as outside the church.

This parable of the talents that we just read, while not as generally well known perhaps as the parable of the Good Samaritan, is nevertheless one that is better known than some others. That might be because it speaks to our culture's or society's emphasis on investments and savings and interest. One of the terms that has come into our world in the last few decades is wealth management. It used to be financial management or investment management. Whatever the terminology, there is a high value on managing that which we have to maximize its value over time.

Because Jesus uses the term talent in telling this parable, it is easy for us to think in terms of not just what we have in the way of financial wealth, but what we have in terms of ability and spiritual gifts. And while that is not an inappropriate extension of what Jesus is talking about, the fact remains that he really was talking about money. The term talent is actually referring to financial wealth. One talent is equal to more than 15 times the annual wages of a laborer in the time of Jesus. So there is a lot of money being talked about in this parable. If one talent equals 15 years of income, then 5 talents is more than 75 years of income—basically more than the income earned in a lifetime. And 2 talents is about half of lifetime income. Again, for the purposes of this parable, a lot of money is involved.

So when we hear of this man who is entrusting these large sums of money with his servants while he was away, it was no small responsibility he was laying on them. The word used here is entrusted. He entrusted his servants with these big chunks of money. Entrusted is the only word he leaves them with. A good definition of entrust is to commit to another with confidence. (Merriam-Webster online dictionary)

Jesus' listeners would have been wide-eyed at this idea of being entrusted with such unimaginable amounts of money. I'm guessing that most of those hearing Jesus would have identified with the servant entrusted with the one talent who buried it in a safe place so that it could be returned in full, without risk of loss, to the owner when he came back.

And yet, this is the very servant who is criticized for his failure to do what the other two servants had done by doubling the value of that which had been entrusted to their care. It just doesn't seem right that this conservative, careful, if also timid servant is punished for his failure to risk and invest.

Now there is an explanation of sorts at the end of the parable when the man returned and rewards the first two of his servants for doubling that which he had entrusted to their care, and punishes the one who did nothing but bury that with which he had been entrusted. He says to his servants, "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."

This parable makes a lot of sense to those of us in the contemporary American culture of free enterprise and freedom. It can serve to inspire us to use all of our resources as investments to grow and take on more and more value in the larger context in which we live.

One of the interesting aspects of Jesus' many parables is that many of them have a timeless quality about them. In some cases, the meaning of the parable is straightforward and universal across the ages. Others of them can speak to and take on new meaning as the context in which they are heard changes. I'd like to suggest today that this parable of the talents fits both of these. There is that timeless aspect that reminds us and encourages to use what we have in such a way that we maximize it over the course of our lives. And this applies to financial wealth, as well as to the other resources we have, in our abilities, endowments, and other giftedness.

But this parable also has an important meaning for us in our current context in which we find ourselves today in November 2020. Specifically, I am speaking of the context of the coronavirus pandemic that is now out of control in our very midst here in Montana. The headline of the Bozeman Daily Chronicle on Friday this week in big bold letters: "No longer keeping up." And yesterday's headline, also in big bold letters: "State of the pandemic: 'Dire'" quoting the Gallatin City-County Health Officer Matt Kelly.

Now anyone who has been paying attention to the state of the pandemic should not be surprised to see these headlines. The metrics used to describe the pandemic have all been going in the wrong direction for some time now.

Here are headlines from the New York Times yesterday:

- Doctors plead on social media for Americans to take the virus surge seriously;
- Two dozen infected residents have died in a coronavirus outbreak at a Kentucky veterans center;
- The months ahead look 'quite horrifying' as U.S. deaths increase.
- Austria goes into a full lockdown.

On Friday, November 13, there were 181,194 new cases in the U.S., a 76% increase over the average 14 days ago. 10.8million Americans have been infected of which 244,250 have died. As of Friday there are 68,516 COVID-related hospitalizations. Hospitals and health care workers are being stretched to their outside limits. There is no place in our nation that has been spared in this pandemic. And just to put it all in the global context. More than 53.7 million people have been infected worldwide with more than 1.3 million deaths.

And all of this is happening on the cusp of the holidays—that very special time of year that is marked with social and family gatherings bringing us together to share our love, affection, and care with each other.

My friends, sisters and brothers in Christ, we are being called as those entrusted with the gifts God has given us to be shrewd investors as we face this crisis. At first blush that may seem a strange thing to say when we are being called on by health professionals to shelter in place as much as possible to slow the spread of the virus. How can this be anything but doing what the servant who buried his master's talent did?

Well I use the word shrewd very intentionally. Because to be shrewd is to be marked by clever discerning awareness and hardheaded acumen and insightfulness (Merriam-Webster online dictionary)

Remember when I mentioned that a talent is equivalent to more than 15 times the annual wages of an average worker in the time of Jesus? And by extension then, 5 talents is more than a full lifetime income?

In the United States alone, more than 244,000 people have died from COVID-19 so far. Let's put that into the talents-context of Jesus' parable. 244,000 lives time 5 talents is 1.2 million talents. 1.2 million talents have been lost. And for the sake of argument, let's say a lifetime income is \$1 million—a very conservative number, meaning \$1.2 trillion is lost in those 244,000 lives lost. And globally, 1.3 million people have died, meaning that 6.5 million talents lost. And, of course, the pandemic is nowhere near over. So those talents lost are only going to increase dramatically. This may seem a strange way to look at it, but I believe that it illustrates that what we're doing collectively as a human community is clearly not working. We are not investing as shrewdly as our intelligence might indicate. As Jesus' hearers were astounded by the numbers he was sharing, we should likely be astounded, stunned, and sobered by these numbers facing us.

You and I must do everything in our power to stem this tide if we are to live into the call Jesus is extending in this parable. For us to throw caution to the wind and engage in customary holiday traditions, hoping against hope that we will not be infected or not cause others to be infected, is not only tempting fate, it is living in opposition to that which we're being called to do, which is to be shrewd investors of the ability we have to combat the spread of the virus.

You know, most of the time in our 21<sup>st</sup> century context, we find it pretty easy to hear the words and teachings of Jesus and put them into practice with little struggle or strain in our daily living. This was not always the case for those encountering Jesus' words. In fact, in more times than not, Jesus was calling his hearers, his followers to what we could call a counter cultural alternative way of living.

I believe that we are living in such a time when our faithfulness to the gospel calls us to stand up to the pressures we may be feeling from our culture, our communities, our traditions, and yes, even our families to act in ways that will contribute to the continued out of control nature of this pandemic.

We're being called to be shrewd investors who must be counter cultural in ways that will help our community and our world to come through this dark time. Our contribution in this way will clear the way for a much brighter future on the other side of this pandemic. In the meantime, by the power of the Holy Spirit, and with the support of our companion Jesus, we can indeed be the shrewd investors we're being called to be.

Now to the ruler of all worlds, undying, invisible, the only God,  
be honor and glory forever and ever! Amen. (1 Tim. 1:17)