

Risking Investment
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Text: Matthew 25:14-30

In light of current economic uncertainties, I've been hearing of many churches behind for 08 and nervous about 09. We're among them. How are all of you doing? Are any of you doing your stewardship campaigns any differently in light of these realities? So read the e-mail from a colleague in another state. We're both part of a group of Presbyterian pastors of congregations with over a thousand members, and his question prompted a flurry of responses from others. *We're cutting some lower-priority programs; we've frozen staff salaries; we've put plans for a capital campaign on hold for at least a year; we're going to 'wait and see' before announcing our mission budget, which is a percentage of pledged income.* The news in these strong, established congregations in relatively affluent areas reflects the larger economic picture. And it isn't pretty.

Given the current chaos in our nation's financial markets, you might question the wisdom of a sermon exhorting us to "risk investment." Some are characterizing the situation as the worst since the Great Depression, and the prevailing mood suggests that the prudent sit tight for awhile and not risk anything. (Although, one stock broker I heard about said that despite today's economic woes, he sleeps like a baby at night. . . . he wakes up every hour and cries.)

The gospel text is a parable about investing which honestly acknowledges the risks, but which also speaks explicitly about the terrible cost of *not* investing. It's a parable Jesus told in the final week of his earthly ministry, just days before his betrayal and arrest. It is part of a larger section of Jesus' teachings about the completion of God's Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven, and how the faithful should live in the

meantime. We know the story—how a wealthy landowner entrusts significant financial resources to three slaves. Do their investment strategies offer guidance for our own? Listen for God's word in the reading from the gospel according to Matthew in the 25th chapter, at the 14th verse.

MATTHEW 25:14-30

On the one hand, there's nothing particularly mysterious about this text. It seems clear: a master departing on a journey, summons three slaves and gives to each a sum of money "according to his ability." It's not a small amount either; a talent was worth more than 15 *years'* wages of a laborer, so we're talking a small fortune here. Two of the slaves get busy and double the sum. The third, however, buries his one talent in a hole he has dug in the ground. Upon the return of the master, the two are rewarded with praise and promised advancement. The one who buried his talent comes forward and explains that fear of the master's harshness and his master's practice of "reaping where he did not sow" prompted him to preserve his capital, which he is now returning intact. The master, however, is enraged, takes the talent from him, gives it to the one who now has ten, and throws the slave out into what is clearly intended as a depiction of Hell. All right, already! We "get it"---if you use your God-given time, talent, and treasure then you will be rewarded and blessed. If you don't. . . .well, it doesn't look so good for you. Therefore, good and faithful brothers and sisters, mark your stewardship commitment cards and watch your investment multiply.

Hmmmmmm. Are you bothered by some aspects of this parable, as I am? For starters, equating this master with God. The one slave accuses him of being harsh and perhaps even conniving, and the master's swift and violent judgment on the slave doesn't belie it. If we connect the master in this parable with God, then what we have is a God who saves us by our work. This God condemns us without mercy if we don't. It's as if the Church says on 51 Sundays that the mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting; by grace we are saved through

faith, but on stewardship Sunday the Church says we are saved through the wise investment of our resources. On 51 Sundays we proclaim God's abundance, but on stewardship Sunday we as much as say it depends upon what you do with it. No wonder people are skeptical about "gratitude-based" stewardship campaigns—too often those campaigns have employed the oldest sales trick in the world: the old bait and switch!

One of the rules for interpreting the Bible insists on consistency: one picture of God cannot contradict another, for example. So, what if we read this parable not as metaphor but as a description of reality? We don't have to assign God the role of harsh and unmerciful master which is polar opposite of the compassionate and steadfast God Jesus revealed in his life and teaching. Instead, think of this parable as a cautionary tale about investing oneself in life....or holding ourselves back for fear of giving ourselves to a losing proposition. One strategy brings increased joy and even greater responsibility; the other, only more fearfulness, decreased options, and diminished hope. When self-preservation and personal security dominate one's life, ahead of everything else, those needs become a kind of prison, an "outer darkness" which isolates and confines. That kind of limited life can only barely be called "living."

God intends so much more for God's beloved children! We see "abundant life exhibit A" in the self-giving, life-affirming way Jesus demonstrated throughout his life, and as he chose death rather than saving his own neck at the cost of his message. Love demands risk. We experience this most clearly perhaps in relationships: choosing to marry and aligning our lives with someone else's; bringing children into our families through birth or adoption; sticking by our friends through thick and thin; supporting one another in the faith community in joy and in sorrow. Given divorce rates, challenges of raising teenagers today, the hundred little betrayals of friendship and the difficulties inherent in building community among strangers and persons of diversity-----given all these and more,

relationships are risky business! But where would any of us be without them???

Go back to the parable. What the master gave each of the three was a gift. Not payment for services rendered; not what was their due. He gave each an abundant gift out of his generosity...and the freedom to use it, invest it, to get in the game, to live. Such freedom also includes the freedom to fail, at least by the world's standard characterized by the saying "The one who dies with the most toys, wins." There's nothing in the parable itself to suggest the master wouldn't have been satisfied with honest effort. What he objects to is doing nothing; hoarding the gift; hiding its potential in the ground where it was safe, but useless.

For the gospel's first readers, the parable contrasted the risk of investment in God's Kingdom with the security of keeping faith an entirely private, interior matter. In those days, promoting the values and ethic of God's Kingdom could get you persecuted or even martyred. But allegiance to God's Kingdom meant letting go of the logic of safety and taking the risk of discipleship. It still does. And risking investment still carries high stakes.

I have not been able to stop thinking about the suicide death earlier this Fall of 46-year-old author David Foster Wallace. Widely hailed as a brilliant observer of human life in the 21st century, recipient of a MacArthur genius grant, his book *Infinite Jest* is a ferocious, if rambling attempt to "cut through the noise" -as he put it---to locate some remedy for society's massive overdosing on the drugs of entertainment and self-gratification. *Fresh Air* re-ran an interview with Wallace some years ago in which he puzzled over the conundrum of his generation. "I think of us as a sad, lost generation," he told host Teri Gross. "We're caught up in making a successful life defined by amassing as much wealth, fame, power as we possibly can, possessing the lovely home and attractive spouse. We have had more opportunity, more money, more privilege, more freedom, than any generation before us. Why

are we so miserable when we have been so lucky?” I wanted to scream into the radio, “Go to church!” but as if Wallace had anticipated such a solution, he laughed apologetically and said, “Oh, hey, I don’t want to sound like “Church Lady” –the character parodied on Saturday Night Live-- or something; you know--- naïve, not-knowing, laughable.” *[preceding paragraph summarized by a Fresh Air interview with Wallace in 1997, rebroadcast in September 2008]*

What struck me about the interview was both the astute analysis of the problem, and yet the hollow stereotype of faith as narrow, judgmental moralism (“a rule for everything, and everything a rule”). For Wallace, Christian faith’s “business” was all about saving you from Satan---not investing yourself in the adventure of a lifetime. Apparently he never found a compelling reason to invest wholly in the noble, messy, risky, ultimately meaningful work of life. We let him down. And I wonder how many others – both in and outside the Church, consciously or not—reduce the gospel of Jesus Christ to a set of instructions for digging the hole where you can keep yourself preserved and all ready for the next life.

Friends, don’t settle for this path, motivated by fear and self-protectiveness! God calls us to invest in this life, to get our mind engaged, our hearts moved and our hands dirty. The “talents” God has given each one are gifts to use not for ourselves alone, but for the world God loves and seeks to transform. Relationship with God—like all relationships— involves risk. So many enterprises to which we’re called as Christians seem like long shots: loving others--even enemies, feeding the hungry, doing justice, building community, seeking truth, caring for the earth, to name a few. But why spend your unique and gifted and infinitely worthy self on anything less than the greatness and glory of the Kingdom of God?

I responded to my pastoral colleagues’ sincere and realistic worries about the economy’s impact on church budgets by telling about Fairmount’s annual campaign, still two weeks’ away from dedication. I acknowledged our shared concern,

and the particular, painful fall-out we face in Cleveland. But I also recalled the consensus among stewardship committee members about this year's theme, sharing abundance. Perhaps there is no better time to remember the abundance of God's grace and goodness and gifts to us than when we are feeling pinched and hurting and anxious. Perhaps there is no better time to risk the cost of discipleship, to invest your life and gifts not in unstable financial markets, but in the eternal Kingdom of God. Commit your time, talents, and treasure to this church as together we pursue a vision God's rule on earth as it is in heaven.

**O the depth of the riches and wisdom and mercy of God!
For from God and through God and to God are all things.
Thanks be to God! Amen.**

The Rev. Louise F. Westfall, D.Min., Pastor