

**Risk and Reward**  
Menno Mennonite Church  
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**Purpose:** To explore the parable of the talents listening for the invitation to live fully.

**Message:** As followers of the risen Christ, we are invited into the anticipation of what God is doing, risking God's grace.

**Scripture:** Matthew 25:14-30 (I Will read); 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

**Synopsis:** The parable of the talents is not a comfortable one. It seems to suggest that God is looking for a return on investment from those who are entrusted with that is God's. Especially we who are well versed in the dogma of capitalism, the conclusions are all but inescapable—produce or be punished.

We come to this as a question of stewardship, by which we mean how well we conserve that which is and grow from there. But perhaps the model of stewarding that is being set here has more to speak to the way things are spent and offered to God instead. With this in mind, how are we being asked to risk for the sake of the kingdom? How to we constrain ourselves by our own anticipations of the consequences of failure in order not to risk and to, seemingly, stay safe?

## **Matthew 25:14–30 (The Message)**

<sup>14</sup>“It’s, [the coming of the Son of God]  
also like a man going off on an extended trip.

He called his servants together  
and delegated responsibilities.

<sup>15</sup>To one he gave five thousand dollars,  
to another two thousand,  
to a third one thousand,  
depending on their abilities.

Then he left.

<sup>16</sup>Right off,  
the first servant went to work  
and doubled his master’s investment.

<sup>17</sup>The second did the same.

<sup>18</sup>But the man with the single thousand  
dug a hole  
and carefully buried his master’s money.

<sup>19</sup>“After a long absence,  
the master of those three servants came back  
and settled up with them.

<sup>20</sup>The one given five thousand dollars  
showed him how he had doubled his investment.

<sup>21</sup>His master commended him:  
‘Good work! You did your job well.  
From now on be my partner.’

<sup>22</sup>“The servant with the two thousand  
showed how he also had doubled his master’s investment.

<sup>23</sup>His master commended him:  
‘Good work! You did your job well.  
From now on be my partner.’

<sup>24</sup>“The servant given one thousand said,

‘Master, I know you have high standards  
and hate careless ways,  
that you demand the best  
and make no allowances for error.

<sup>25</sup>I was afraid I might disappoint you,  
so I found a good hiding place  
and secured your money.  
Here it is, safe and sound down to the last cent.’

<sup>26</sup>“The master was furious.  
‘That’s a terrible way to live!  
It’s criminal to live cautiously like that!  
If you knew I was after the best,  
why did you do less than the least?’

<sup>27</sup>The least you could have done  
would have been to invest the sum with the bankers,  
where at least I would have gotten a little interest.

<sup>28</sup>“ Take the thousand and give it to the one who risked the most.

<sup>29</sup>And get rid of this “play-it-safe” who won’t go out on a limb.

<sup>30</sup>Throw him out into utter darkness.’

[play commercial: Smith Barney]

It's hard not to feel the discomfort with this parable. Tuned as we are to the ways and means of the capitalistic lifestyle, we feel like Jesus is dispensing a bit of investment advice here on the way to make the right moves to realize a return on investment. Something like the stuff you see taking a golf induced nap on a Sunday afternoon (a favorite pastime, my second favorite sleep sport after curling). Be wise; do good work; invest wisely and be sure to return a reasonable profit when the final counting has come to pass. That's a fairly easy reading of this parable and, it must be said, not an entirely unreasonable one. Earn the work of your salvation—stuff that makes sense to us because, frankly, that is what we want to do. We want to work harder, study better and get rewarded for it because that is not only what we understand, but it is also that which we can control. We would like to gain our Salvation the old fashioned way—we would earn it. If only we could.

This seems like a good moment to remind us that parables are stories that, more than anything else, have layers to their mean. Or, perhaps, a better turn would be facets—a different light, a different meaning all depending on how one turns it and holds it up to the light of the Spirit. Stories with the right, moral answer would never have lasted us for 2000 years of consideration and teaching; they were never really Jesus' style anyway. The point here isn't so much I think to give us advice on prudent profit margins as it is to engage the ways we seek first the Kingdom of God. I think there is something to be said for holding this out and seeing the way that the light refracts, sending shards of light into perhaps unseen corners here. It will readily say that this is breaking new territory for me as I have not really engaged this one, lest my sense of the investment landscape be found wanting. All the more reason to jump in.

Let's start here: We need to consider the where why and when here of this parable. It is part of a far larger sermon begun all the way back the chapter previous given as Jesus prepares the disciples for the impending departure of the one that they know as the Messiah. He has just gotten done warning them about the conjecture around the time, place, and means of the return of the waiting and wanting master, and nestles this parable in the middle of three meant to speak to the anticipation of the kingdom—the problem of balancing anticipation with the reality of a life to live. The first of these parables is the discussion of the bridesmaids waiting up for the bridegroom to appear, differentiating between those who prepare and those who fall short. After this comes the narrative of the Sheep and the Goats, with those most Anabaptist of reflections

asking Jesus where we might have seen him hungry, alone or without clothing. So all of this is a broad discussion about what will be right before the events of the passion are about to kick off in earnest. So to be clear, the point here isn't about the cycles of the markets and the wisdom of investing. The questions being weighed here is far bigger than that. This is about the meantime—that hard part waiting for the way that God will come and display the world as it ultimately is. All of these parables point us to the same thing and, taken in series, could yield a helpful three point plan: Remain prepared, as with the women, do not be afraid to take the risks of the kingdom, living life fully (as with this parable) and remember God in the least of these (The sheep and the goats). Together it is a good briefing of what was about to get underway as the disciples are launched into the next chapter of their life in the kingdom. It is worth also saying that the parables are given to presenting both Justice and grace, but embracing one without the other is a good way to distort the actual message involved.

I selected Eugene Petersen's *Message* version because I think it gets this balance right. It speaks nicely to the broader issue of life and living at stake here rather than simply the transactional matter of fact of the investments being questioned. But I do differ on one point with what was read here: the amounts involved. The rendering of "THOUSANDS" doesn't really do justice to what we are talking here. A talent in the ancient near East was a measure of silver or gold basically equal to the weight of an adult, more or less—150 or so pounds of gold. Extrapolate that to today's money and you would have a tidy sum even by today's standards. Jesus' hyperbole here was that these were not mean sums to be guarded or invested lightly, as sometimes happens when we try on some modest sum in the name of the kingdom. This is generational wealth here—billions almost in money, and requiring an awfully big hole to bury it in (to say nothing of a rather large catastrophe to lose it all and to come back with nothing). The point here has a lot more to do with the notion that preparation has a lot more to do with simply providing enough to make it. As understandable, even admirable as the servant's desire to preserve the preciousness of what he was meant to protect, it was not, ultimately the point. It turns out that preservation is not the same as preparation, and endurance is not simply ending up where you started.

With all of this unpacked, what then are we going to do with all of this? How do we see the third servant: Lazy? Scared? Stupid? All of the above? I wonder- - where do we see ourselves. I wonder how many times we get the responses we expect from other people not

because these are the natural responses, but simply because we are expecting one thing or the next from the other in the first place? Often times we anticipate the worst of people and get exactly what we were expecting. I know that my imagination is among my worst enemies, especially when so much of what I do involves speaking into people's lives and having little to know idea whether anything registers, let alone has meaning and take root. Whether or not it is the truth is beside the point; our anticipation makes it so.

Thomas Long applies this well to the case of the fearful servant: "To be a child of the generous, gracious, and life-giving God and, nonetheless, to insist up on viewing God as oppressive, cruel, and fear provoking is to live a life that is tragically impoverished," while those who trust in God's generosity "find more and more of that generosity; but for those who run and hide under the bed from a bad, mean, and scolding God, they condemn themselves to a life spent under the bed along, quivering in endless fear." As much as we are apprehensive about the end of the world, we are invited—commanded—to also live our lives in the anticipation of the holy God.

As much as this text is about stewardship and how resources are used or not used, our talents are put into use or not—all good and worthy things to talk about here, I think there is also something simpler still: to be reminded that the lives we live as a matter of being about the Mater's business matter in the end. And not because it is the way that we return an adequate return in order to EARN anything. Instead, we do the master's business here in the midst of indescribable bounty. I think Jesus here is making it alright to put our talents, our gifts, our hopes into circulation for the sake of the kingdom. In the meantime of waiting for the return, we cannot become so preoccupied as to forget that this is only the meantime and not that on which we wait, nor so dominated by the anticipation of what will be that we forget to be about the work of being the people of God that we were created to be.

Maybe instead of a notion of spending or depleting our resources as the enemy of good stewardship, we are invited into a broader economy of faith. Maybe the point of doing the work of the faith is not burying the faith (as we so often do) nor to maximize its return, but instead to participate in the exchange of the marketplace. Risking and spending requires courage and conscience every bit as much as conservation and preservation. There is virtue, growth, and comfort in the basic exchange of our gifts for those who we need. As we wait for God, how are we doing the work of God to build the reality in which God's kingdom will be finally and fully

realized? We are tempted always to walk that fine line between wise and thrifty; I am still not sure if there is a lot of value in keeping all those soap snippets to make another couple of mix-and-match bars to recycle again and again—maybe that was just me though.

This is a parable with which we will always struggle. I am not sure I like what it is teaching me, or the questions it asking. But perhaps that's the point—a wake up call to disturb our slumbering anticipation of what is to be, reminding us that we have been given treasure beyond our very imagination for right here and now. How does this speak to us not just individually, but more over as a whole church body together?

May we be given a vision for the wide world waiting for the gifts of God made real through us and all around us. And may we be given the vision for the participation in all that God is going in God's world of love. AMEN.