

Investing with Courage

Menno Mennonite Church

November 19, 2023

Purpose: To explore the invitation to courage as Jesus speaks to the future.

Message: As people of faith we are invited into mindful waiting for what will be that moves beyond fear of what could be.

Scripture: Matthew 25:14-30 (I will read); Psalm 90: 1-8

Synopsis: The parable of the talents is quite possibly most widely used and, in many cases, abused of the parables of Jesus. Its implication of gifting for and with the kingdom and demanding return on investment lends itself to both literalism (with the profit motives to support it) as well as perfectionism as we seek to satisfy the demands of our Lord lest we are found wanting in the mean time. A less popular though valid reading of this text links it to the broader context of what is being spoken—the final coming of God’s kingdom—and invites us not to be paralyzed in our waiting. Paired with its adjacent texts of the Bridesmaids and the following sheep and goats, we are given a message like this: be prepared as you do not know, yet continue the work here and now, knowing that Jesus will at that time find his own and receive them as they deserve. This liberates us from the fear-bound waiting to be about the already here even as we wait for what is yet to be.

Matthew 25:14-30

¹⁴“For it is as if a man, going on a journey,
summoned his servants and entrusted his property to them;

¹⁵to one he gave five talents,
to another two,
to another one, to each according to his ability.
Then he went away.

¹⁶The one who had received the five talents
went off at once and traded with them,
and made five more talents.

¹⁷In the same way,
the one who had the two talents made two more talents.

¹⁸But the one who had received the one talent
went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money.

¹⁹After a long time the master of those servants came
and settled accounts with them.

²⁰Then 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.’

²¹His master said to him,
‘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.’

²²And 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.’

²³His master said to him,
‘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.’

²⁴Then 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;
²⁵so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground.
Here you have what is yours.’

²⁶But his master replied,
‘You wicked and lazy servant!
You knew, did you,
that I reap where I did not sow,
and gather where I did not scatter?’

²⁷Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers,
and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest.

²⁸So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents.

²⁹For 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.

³⁰As for this worthless servant, throw him into the outer darkness,
where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

There is something magical about investing. The notion that if you place money in the right place for a given amount of time you will get *more* money. If you do the simple mathematical calculation of interest being a function of rate and time, compounding again and again with remarkable results. Growing up in a home where the evening network news was mandatory nightly viewing, with the good, bad and ugly on display you knew what was going on. You learn quickly that there was an economic world out there was presented daily with the red and green arrows keeping score. Some of it stuck along the way and I have always been intrigued to with the implications of what it all meant. So much so that when we had the opportunity in sixth grade to live out a simulated economic world within our classroom in the shape of Hessyville (my teacher was Mr. Hess), I took to the notion well beyond the ordinary. Not satisfied with the cardboard storefronts and the pencil trade for classroom currency alone, I devised some sort of investment element to enhance my particular enterprise selling shares as well. Don't ask me what it was or how it worked because I don't remember—I think there was some sort of dividend scheme or some such--but I do recall being utterly enthralled by the thing. Ever since, when I happen to run into Mr. Hess when back east or get the reports from my parents meeting him in the supermarket, he remembers the robber baron of Oak Street School.

I think what captivated me then is the notion that math worked just like that—that capital invested always grows and the returns should be counted as universally positive. That the market status is always green. What takes a bit more time and experience to learn is that is not always true and seldom automatic. That all investment is risk and that returns are never guaranteed. Markets go up and down. Money in does not always mean money out. Corporations, markets and entire industries go through cycles of growth stability and ultimately decline. No matter how well practiced we are, watching the daily ups and downs can make us nervous. Even as someone with only nominal exposures it is out I hear the news and ponder. It is humanness of fear and foreboding that drives the market and ultimately picks winners and losers.

I will readily say that the parable for this morning is not among my favorites. We know it. It is out there in our minds and imagination, but that doesn't make it a good thing. I am generally not enthusiastic about engaging it. The parable of the talents is among the most abused texts of the New Testament. It has had to support all sorts of troubled readings. That God is a God of capitalism where the expectation is for return on investment on what has been given lest we are condemned. Rather than a reliance on the good gifts of God for which we can be thankful in

receiving, we are given gifts in order that we should invest them in the market of the world. The gospel of economic prosperity where God rewards the shrewd and punishes the unfortunate is not what this is illustrating. Our investing that which we have been given in skill and resources is welcome but the returns or the lack there of are not what Jesus is measuring us on here. There is no assured payout for the proper strategy nor pronounced doom for failure.

Instead, this is one of a series of parables attempting to describe the kingdom of God and how it functions in the now even as it awaits the coming full realization of its final promise. The teaching of the talents recalls the parable of the faithful and wise servant who continues to do the work of the master until the master comes (24:45-51). Although the master is delayed, he arrives to find the wise servant doing the tasks that have been appointed to him in the master's absence. The foolish slave, however, has neglected his work and abused his power. He receives severe punishment. Similarly, Like the parable of the ten maidens before it those who wait upon its coming and the meaning that is found in that. The kingdom is not simply likened to a man on a journey, but to the story that follows — a story that illustrates how the disciples are to wait until the Lord comes. This is the third in the series of illustrations meant to explain the wonder of the Kingdom of God.

We are familiar with the contours of the story. Each servant is entrusted with a staggering sum of money—one talent being more than 20 years of a labor's wages—so think unimaginable sums at work here. Each one does what they deem best and on the return of the owner present the results of what they had gotten up to. For those who took a risk, a return reward is offered. But for the one who opted for the path of caution but also of personal safety there is condemnation. Blaming the strategy on the demanding nature of the owner didn't help. Even the safest investments hold some risk of loss. We assume it is what God expects of us because it is what we anticipate God expecting of us.

What if, though, this is not the principle that we are after here that Jesus is wanting us to focus on. Rather than the demands of the market, he is addressing the fears of not knowing what will happen, and the costs of acting and not.

In economics there is a concept called opportunity cost. It is a fairly simple notion. It asks the question of balancing the what you are doing at that moment with the cost of NOT doing the next best thing. Think of taking a nap—a wholly good and wonderful thing to do and entirely necessary for time to time. But if there is a choice between taking a nap and completing

your taxes on, say, the 15th day of April, it might be a particularly costly time to take a nap because the time you spend resting might be balanced by the deadline hanging over your head (if you are given to such things). I am sure that for this crowd this doesn't need a whole lot of further explanation as you know it well. The cost of planting wheat is that you can't grow something that might be more profitable when it comes time to sell. You get the point.

We can get so focused on the bottom-line outcomes in these parables that we can forget what all goes into what Jesus is saying. Remember the context here. Jesus is getting ready to leave. In John's gospel we have chapters of Jesus' impassioned prayers for the disciples he was leaving behind. This is the parallel in Matthew. This is part of an extended sermon explaining the whys and wherefores of the kingdom as he prepares for his passion and resurrection. As such, they must be viewed in this way and part of the larger points he is trying to teach here. He has already taught them to take up the work of the kingdom in chapter 24, to be prepared for the coming of his return with anticipation and preparation as with the parable of the brides maids and bridegroom, and now he offers this simile by way of focusing them on what really matter in the end: the courage to take on the challenges of living in the kingdom present and not just the kingdom yet to come.

The important thing in watching for the coming kingdom is not the signs and the times, though they can be preoccupying when we read them. The truly important reality is to remember that there is much to do between now and then. The purpose is not to apply anxious waiting lest we be found wanting, but to liberate us from the apathy of bland indifference simply waiting on what will be without agency. These parables in series all reflect on the situation of not knowing and invite us to the work of vigilant waiting, doing the work of the kingdom now lest the opportunity to encounter that kingdom might be denied from those in need of change. The future is unknown and the timeline is uncertain; if they were more clear we could better calculate our investment strategy to have it come out just right (part of why we are so obsessed with getting it right). Jesus does not give the disciples the details of the future that awaits them without his physical presence but he does let them know, and us know, that he entrusts all that he has built in to our trust and care. That is the fuller story that is being shared here.

The real investment being studied here is not the one made in handing out the talents with demands for a return. Likening the Kingdom of God to the capital markets where value is measured in dollars and cents does not and cannot work. Instead, the kingdom is composed of

human beings in whom God is invested and values deeply. It is God who makes the investment in the world and it is God who will bring that to its own maturity in time. But the point is the process as much as the return.

The talents serve as a measure of what the stakes are. But the operative mechanism here is the faith of the ones taking the chances with what has been given. The courage is found in taking the risk in the name of the one on whom we wait. Where faith is extended, regardless of measure or quality, there are returns. Faith is meant to be lived and moved, not hid and neglected least it be found wanting. When it is hidden it does not last and cannot yield what it is meant to. Jesus is preparing those who he loves for their greatest test. For many of those hearing this first, the troubling language here in the parable was only matched by the far more troubling trials that awaited them in the future.

The challenge of faith is always a challenge that asks us to risk something for the sake of the kingdom. We have our favorite stories of those who risked much and lost more for the sake of the call of Christ. Yet I wonder whether we hear the stories in their proper light: are these the tales of what has been in the long ago past to be celebrated and venerated with feast of memory but not purposed for our internalization and following to go and do likewise? I wonder where the church of the today fits in this parable: as those who risk much in the name of faith, or those who decline the invitation to risk to ensure predictable returns? When we are guided by the principles of empire and economics more than those of the beloved community and the kingdom come do we bury our talents in the ground? When we fail to live the good news fully, what then are we losing in the process?

We are invited to count the cost not just of what we do in the kingdom, but also of that which we decline for the want of courage. May we invest not only wisely, but courageously, knowing that the faith of the kingdom causes all things to grown as God gives grace.