

"Entering into the Joy"
A Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan – Nov. 15, 2020

PLEASE READ:
1 Thessalonians 5:1-11
Matthew 25:14-30

I'll never forget. 34 years ago, Chase Hunt invited me to be on the Stewardship Committee of Princeton Theological Seminary. As a second-year student, I said, "sure," figuring I could learn a lot. At the first meeting, I was asked to be the treasurer, and the first thing you have to know about me is that I am a man of letters, not numbers. Kim is the numbers person in our family. It was one of life's many ironies that I became the treasurer of the Princeton Theological Seminary Stewardship Committee. But I learned a lot! I saw who was giving what and where the money was going. It was a humbling experience for me, for up to that point in my life, I wasn't a giver.

Honestly, I was ignorant about giving. A few months into the meetings, I mustered the courage to ask Chase about what a *tithe* was. I didn't know. I was a student. I didn't have any money at all, and so how could I give 10 percent of nothing? He said everybody receives some money to live, and God invites you into an adventure of trust. Tithing, giving ten percent of the money you receive back to God, is a way of practicing that trust. Chase challenged me to "put God to the test," to see if God was trustworthy with my tithe, and so I started giving. And I have never quit. It's been one of the great challenges, but even greater sources of joy in my faith journey. Tithing is a great way to begin to experience the joy of letting go, of trusting God, and seeing God's faithfulness in concrete ways.

In preparation for our Commitment Sunday, also known as Walk Forward Sunday, December 6th, I invite you to reflect with me on stewardship. I *like* to talk about stewardship because God calls us to change the world. You've probably seen bumper stickers or email signatures with Ghandi's so-called advice to "Be the change you want to see in the world." Actually, that's not what Ghandi said. What he said is: "If *we* could change *ourselves*, the tendencies in the world would also change..."^[1] Ghandi believed we can change the world, but through the collective effort for change.

So, stewardship in the Christian community is about investing in Community, making a collective impact in the world. It involves investing in feeding the hungry like some of our youth and families did last week at the New Covenant House. It's investing in the children and youth of our church through the search committee that has been meeting weekly until we call a new Director for Children and Youth Ministries. It's for providing a generous wage to support them in the coming years of rebuilding the ministry to our youth and children. It's about marching for Black Lives Matters to show solidarity with our neighbors of color. Stewardship is about investing in a brilliant music ministry that has touched hundreds if not thousands in our town and providing space here for a school that nurtures preschoolers. It's about being a community that welcomes and celebrates the gifts of the LGBTQ community. It's about rallying the greater community through programs like the Dove fundraiser to bring hope and encouragement to families who are suffering economically. It's about offering welcome bags to newcomers in our town in these isolating times of the pandemic, and support and provide resources to those people living in fear of domestic violence and abuse. It's about caring for our increasingly

isolated elders and showing compassion to those who are struggling with grief and the loss of a loved one.

Stewardship is a personal, but collective effort to share the hope of a better life and a fairer world in light of the good news of Jesus Christ. It's about trusting God with everything, and about taking risks to trust God more with all of life. It was Alexander Smith, the Scottish novelist, and poet who once said, "Everything is sweetened by risk." In a time when central bankers are talking about minimizing risk, people of faith are called to increase our risk in strategic ways.

You don't need me to tell you that money is a significant indicator of our priorities. You know the saying, "Follow the money!" How we spend money reveals a lot about our priorities and risk management. Jesus knew that, and our parable today gets at the issue of risk.

"For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them." You know the story – the master divided up all he had, gave it to his servants, and left. Servants one and two had pretty good results, but servant number three didn't do so well. The man took the talent he had been given and buried it. But before we're too harsh on this third servant, you need to remember what a "talent" is.

A talent in Jesus' day was the term to refer to the largest money denomination in the first century-world financial system. We should translate this word in the Greek "talanta" into English as "a boat-load of cash" or a "Wall Street CEO severance check." Only the strongest of men could even pick up a *talanton*, as it weighed 75-100 pounds. A talent was the equivalent of 15 years of wages for a worker. Five of them would be like receiving millions of dollars in cash!

So, I wouldn't be too hard on servant number three. But that's the trouble. We're not talking about me or you here. Jesus is talking about the kingdom. He's talking about when the master returns, and the accounts are settled. Servant number one doubled the money he had been given. Servant number two doubled his investment as well.

And then there is servant number three. He is proud of himself. He didn't spend the money on himself. He didn't go down to *Mohegan Sun* (a casino here in CT, one of the largest in the US). He didn't spend it on his friends. He kept it intact by burying it, every last dollar. In the first century, burying money was considered a sensible way of guarding against theft. So that's what he does. Slave number three also says something about the master being tough, reaping where he did not sow, but mostly he said, 'Here is all your money, every bit of it. I wasted nothing.'

And the master replies, "You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I was hard. Then you at least should have invested the money in the bank so I could have some interest on my money. So, take all of this little wretch's money, clean off the backyard dirt, and give it to the other servants."

And then comes the line - that sobering phrase, "*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.*"

What do you think about a text like that? In our world, when we are facing a surge in CV19 numbers, and when Jerome Powell of the Federal Reserve warns about global economic vulnerability, and when millions are unemployed and wondering how to pay the mortgage, struggling to hold onto their marriages and families, is that a fitting text for a sermon on stewardship?

Is this Jesus' new economic stimulus package that merely blesses the *status quo*? It is one thing to attack the third slave's overly careful, miserly caution. But it goes beyond that! In one sense, this is clearly a story about *judgment*. It's about accountability. There shall be a day of reckoning. And the moral of this story is simple: if you're not increasing, you're decreasing.

And that's kind of where we've been over the past few years in this church, isn't it, I'm sorry to say. We haven't increased. We've been decreasing. And we're worried. We're afraid. Do we talk about what if we don't get more young families? We talk about the *Pareto Principle*, and how 20% are paying for 80% of the bills and doing all the work. And we're tempted to just bury what we have in the ground, and play it safe?

But you know what? *I know that's not who you are. You are people of grace. You are people of generosity.*

It may be hard to see, but I believe this is also a story about grace and generosity. Surprisingly, grace and generosity permeate the whole story if you look at it carefully. The grace is there from the very beginning, from the very first line. Did you miss it? Jesus says that the master was going away on a journey, and he summoned his three servants, and he gave them - not some money, not just a little cash to tide them over until he got back. What does the text say? It says he *entrusted his property to them*. He gave them his estate. He divided what he had and gave it to them. He took most, if not all of his net worth and gave it to them.

Which means, that everything of who he is and everything of what he has is utterly dependent upon what they do with it. And who is he? Well, we have to wait and see until his servant's report. If they blow it, he's blown it. He's given them everything until he gets back. We knew it was an hour of judgment, a moment of accounting, but we missed really *whose* accounting it is, *who* is really at risk here.

The *Master* is the one taking all the risks. He has entrusted his whole life, everything, to his servants. That trust is the most extravagant grace I know, to be utterly vulnerable to others. To give yourself: that's the grace.

He gave them all he had. Of course, this should sound familiar, right? Jesus is telling this story toward the end of his ministry, just before he goes on a journey to Calvary. Here is a story of grace and generosity told by the most gracious and generous Master of all, the One who gave his very life and entrusted to us the keys of his kingdom. The One who is

very God of very God gave everything so we might receive and multiply God's gracious joy for all!

Which leaves us with the question, what are we going to do with the gift we have been given? Will we be gracious and generous, risking again for a better life and a fairer world for all? Will we invest in that which is larger than ourselves, a dream that will be realized long after we are gone, a dream quite frankly, that we can't realize on our own?

The moral of the story is that the third servant never really received the gift in the first place. He missed it. He didn't receive the risk, so he never got the gift. And that's the bad news of unbelief: not living the risk of the gospel, the good news that God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus offers new life, a life of freedom to live, to invest, to experience the sheer joy of the Master who is Lord of all.

The other two slaves didn't just get their risk; they got their gift. So, when the Master comes back, they hear those great words, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave. You've been faithful over a little; I'll put you over much. Enter into the joy of your master!"

I love the story about the wealthy businessman who stood up at a church meeting to tell the rest of those present about his Christian faith. "I'm a multi-millionaire," he said, "and I attribute it all to the rich blessings of God in my life. I remember that turning point in my faith. I had just earned my first hundred dollars, and I went to a church meeting that night. The speaker was a missionary who told about his work. I knew that I only had a hundred-dollar bill and had to either give it all to God's work or nothing at all. So, at that moment, I decided to give everything to God. I believe that God blessed that decision, and that is why I am a rich man today."

He finished, and there was an awed silence as he moved toward his seat. As he sat down, a little old lady sitting in the same pew leaned over and said: "I dare you to do it again."

Friends, I invite you to consider what the Lord has risked on you? How are you managing that risk today? Whether you are a student, or a multi-millionaire: The clear message for you and me - the clear message for our church community - is this: Everything is sweetened by risk! The gospel is not about fear. It's about faith, hope, and love. It's about investing in what is good and true. In the end, it's about entering into the joy of our Master.

The One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

[1] Brian Morton, "Falsar Words Were Never Spoken," (*New York Times*, Aug. 29, 2011), referenced November 13, 2020:
<https://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/30/opinion/falsar-words-were-never-spoken.html>