

"Walking Forward"

**A Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan, CT – November 19, 2023**

**PLEASE READ:
II Corinthians 9:6-15
Matthew 25:14-30**

I love the story about the wealthy businessman who walked forward at a church meeting to tell the rest of those present about his Christian faith. "I'm a multi-billionaire," 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 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 it all 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 to him: "I dare you to give it all again!"

In preparation for walking forward later in our service, I invite you to consider why we actually walk forward at all? Today is about stewardship, of course, and about walking forward to make our pledge for the coming year... but we also walk forward for the celebration of the Lord's Supper each month. Every month there is an invitation to walk forward to receive grace at the table, so we are strong to share grace in our lives and life together... The more I have thought about it, the more I hope today is about walking forward to receive grace at the table, so we are strong to share grace in our lives and life together.

Jesus said it is more blessed to give than it is to receive, so walking forward is not a magical get-rich scheme like the rich businessman might have imagined. Walking forward today is first of all about remembering God's grace in our lives, the many gifts and blessings we have received through the miracle of life, through our family and friends, the signs of God's faithfulness throughout the ups and downs of our lives. It's not a coincidence that we are moving into Thanksgiving week. We are here to remember that thanks from the heart is best shown in giving, in paying it forward to bless others.

That's why our stewardship theme this year is "Investing in the Beloved Community." We know the world is in a bad place. There are too many people who think violence is the way forward, whether in the Senate, or the House, or in Ukraine or Gaza. There are too many people without hope. People who feel they are discriminated against because of the color of their skin, or their sexual orientation, or gender. We know we need to build bridges and not walls. We need to pursue the vision for the Beloved Community the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King helped to proclaim in his ministry: a community in which everyone is cared for, absent of poverty, hunger, and hate.

It's a community where all are respected and given equal rights and opportunity, a community where love triumphs over hate, peace over violence, hope over despair. That's what the way of Jesus is all about, and I hope we are willing to take risks to invest in the Beloved Community.

It was Alexander Smith, the Scottish novelist and poet who once said, "Everything is sweetened by risk." 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 - he 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. William Herzog, author of *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed*, explains that in Jesus's day, "talents" were not coins or small wads of cash. They were hefty precious metals (usually gold or silver) that weighed somewhere between 80 and 130 pounds. A single talent was worth approximately twenty years of an ordinary laborer's wages. In other words, a talent represented a staggering amount of money to Jesus's peasant audience.

Seriously, that's a lot of money, 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 any of the money on himself. He didn't go down to the city or spend it on his friends. He kept it intact by burying it, every last dollar. In the first century burying your money was considered the most 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."

I would much rather preach on the Corinthian text about "God loves a cheerful giver!" I would rather preach on the obvious truth that "Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously." It makes perfect sense to stand here and tell you that you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God is able to make his grace

abound in us, so that in all things at all times, having all that we need, we will abound in every good work... That's so true!

But what Jesus says is: *"To those who have, they will receive more, and to those who have not, even the little they have will be taken away."* Is this Jesus' new economic stimulus package that merely blesses the status quo of our world?

It is one thing to attack the third slave's overly careful, miserly caution. But it goes quite beyond that! To those who have, they will receive more, and to those who have not, even the little they have will be taken away. It is really a story about *judgment*. The master shall hold us to account. There shall be a day of reckoning. And the moral of this story is simple: *if you're not increasing, you're decreasing...*

It all seems so harsh, so unyielding and firm. As we questioned in last week's parable of the foolish bride's maids, where is the grace? Where is the grace in this master who is so tough on the well-intentioned, careful servant?

The truth is, grace permeates the whole story, if you look carefully. The grace is there from the very beginning, from the very first line. Did you hear 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 gave them all he had. He gave them his estate. He divided what he had and gave it to them. He took everything he was worth and gave it all to them.

Which means, that everything of who he is and everything of what he has is utterly dependent upon what they have done with who he is. And who is he? Well, we have to wait and see until his servants 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 has given them everything. He has entrusted his whole life, everything, to his servants. That trust is the most extravagant grace I know, to be utterly vulnerable to the behavior of another. There's the grace.

Jesus is telling this story toward the end of his ministry, just before he goes on a long journey to a place called Calvary. Here is a story of extravagance told by the most extravagant master of all, the One who gave up his very life and entrusted to us the keys of the kingdom. Jesus went to Calvary to die on the cross so that we might live in God's gracious gift of salvation.

Stewardship, you see, is all about reflecting both our gratitude, and our understanding that grace is received is to be shared. We are blessed to be a blessing to others. We are

not asking for money just to keep the lights on. We believe God is calling us to grow our mission, to increase, not to decrease.

The tithe, 10 percent, is training wheels for those of us learning how to give. I had a friend who said, the question should not be how much should I give to God, but how much should I keep for myself? We are clearly some of the richest people in the world. We are called to give our lives, all that we are and all that we have to build the Kingdom of God, to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to house the homeless, to set the captives of poverty and ignorance free for new life. But honestly, we are not risking much.

Little to nothing is what the third servant got. He missed it. If you sense only the fear of risk, but don't receive the gift (of grace), there is nowhere to go except to the back yard or the bank in fear and trembling. As the money got buried, there was no decision to be made. As the money got buried, there was no more risk to take. It was over. No defeat, no possibility of victory or elation, no exhilarating risk, no joy, no sorrow, no grace. There's nothing there but a hole and a whole lot of money, and the third servant, standing there over the hole, ready to get pushed into it.

Yesterday, I had a strange experience that I thought I should share. I helped lead a memorial service for Connie Musa. Eric, her husband, agreed that I should read the obituary of her life. I had the weird sensation as I was reading the obituary that I had gotten confused about which obituary I had included in my notes. It was a pastor's nightmare. The reason I had this panic attack was that her obituary included some of her career track in the oil industry and her role as an executive assistant. The thing is, and here's the point, not one person in her family or circle of friends had ever mentioned anything at all to me about her corporate life. None of that seemed to matter. It was the time she invested with her family and friends, the giving she offered to the community and this church that everyone talked about.

The other two slaves didn't just get their risk, they got the gift, and they increased it. They heard those great words, "Well done, good and faithful servant. You've been faithful over a little; I'll put you over much. Enter into the joy of your master!" They received the joy of experiencing some of the gracious extravagance that characterizes the way this master does business.

Friends, walking forward is a symbolic gesture, I realize, and whether you are a billionaire or not, today is a great opportunity to put your trust anew in God, to say thank you, and to say yes to investing in the Beloved Community, remembering that, "Everything is sweetened by risk!"

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.