

Grow: Are You All In?

Matthew 25:14-30

November 13, 2022

One of my favorite books on the purpose and practice of generosity is this thin paperback from 1977, *My Gospel of Stewardship*, written by Dr. Thomas L. Are. The book has special meaning for me because Tom wrote it when he was pastor of Shallowford Presbyterian Church, the congregation in Atlanta that I later served for seven fruitful years. One of Tom's central messages, delivered with theological depth and personal testimony, is that any genuine commitment requires radical trust and life-altering risk. He tells the story of a church member who called to come and see him one day, sat in his office, and confessed to his pastor some serious lapses in professional judgment. What the man had done was not technically illegal, but it was deeply unethical. And he needed to cover his tracks. His legal practice and marriage were in serious trouble. The man asked Tom to pray for him, but then he began to break down and cry. "What am I going to do, Tom?"

The pastor replied, "If I were you, I believe I would begin giving to the church." Tom continues, "At first the man thought I was joking." But no pastoral advice could have been more serious or heartfelt, for the man "had reached a point in life where he had to covenant with God or just continue to live in the same rut he was in." He needed to make a radical decision to trust God, not partially, not halfway, but fully. Not with empty promises, but with concrete actions. He needed to take a risk. And only then would he experience transformation.

Jesus told a story. A man going on a long journey summons his servants, distributes his property among them. To one, five talents. To another two talents. To a third servant he gave one talent. And then, he went away. Disappeared. Now let me pause to make clear what would have been obvious to this

story's original audience. A talent is a sum of money, a very large sum of money—roughly equivalent to half a million dollars. So, what is being given here is something extremely valuable, far more than any of these servants could have hoped to earn in a lifetime.

In the story, the money is given without explanation or expectation, no direction, perhaps inviting us to think about how we might handle such a fortune.

The first two servants wheel and deal. They trade and invest, and—amazingly—they double their talents. The one who received one talent, by contrast, is cautious, prudent. Of the three, he's the one I would want on the finance committee. He takes no chances. He puts the boss' resources away for safekeeping, where he can be absolutely certain he will return every dime entrusted to him and therefore avoid the wrath of his master.

The master returns and is delighted with the first two servants. "You have been trustworthy in a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Enter the joy of your master!"

Now, wait a minute. From where I sit, that's a strange definition of trustworthiness. Sure, it worked out for them this time, but you don't double an investment by playing it conservatively. You must be willing to risk it all to collect that kind of return. And so, I would expect the master to say something like, "Well done, *courageous* servant," "well done, *fearless* servant," or perhaps most to the point, "well done, *very lucky* servant." But trustworthy?

Not the way I think of the word. In fact, the most trustworthy servant is the third one—sensible, careful, steady, reliable, the finance committee member. No dramatic gains, sure. But no hurtful

losses either. And, most importantly, no risk. After all, the talent did not belong to him in the first place. I would expect the master to address this third servant something like this: “Well, ok. You did what you could. You were respectful of my property.” Instead, the response is breathtakingly harsh. “You wicked, lazy servant. Take the money from him and throw him out into the street.”

I can imagine the shock of the audience when Jesus first spoke these words, and I can imagine that perhaps some of you are feeling the same way this morning. What do we make of this story? What does it have to do with Commitment Sunday at Second Presbyterian Church? Surely none of us will be cast into outer darkness at the end of this service.

But remember, this is a parable. It is a story meant to shift perspective, to open us to a deeper understanding, perhaps connect us with words that we have heard before. And for the disciples, traveling the road of ministry with Jesus, the story might call to mind words they've heard *their* master speak not long ago: “Those who want to save their lives will lose it, and those who lose their lives for my sake will find it.” Perhaps they will remember the words of their master: “What will it profit them to gain the whole world if they forfeit their souls?”

My New Testament professor Charlie Cousar called this “gospel investment advice.” That is, only when we release our lives into God’s hands can we receive the life God intends. Like tomato seeds and tulip bulbs, our faith does not grow until it is released to God’s trustworthy plan. The first two servants go all in, risking everything to invest what the master has given them. The third servant’s careful calculation is simply self-protection.

And here’s the message: That’s no way to follow Jesus. That’s no way to live your life—to hold back, to avoid risk, to huddle in a constant state of fear in this one shot you have at life.

If you want to save your heart from breaking, don’t give it to anyone, don’t give it to anything. Just bury it. Put it away. After all, what could be riskier than

following your passion? What could be riskier than investing yourself, all that you have—time, energy, faith, resources, God-given gifts and talents—in something bigger than yourself? What could be riskier than living your life for Jesus Christ and not personal gain, prosperity, or worldly success? What could be riskier than that?

Time and again the temptation will be prudence. Bury what you’ve been given; protect what you have. We say to ourselves, “It might not be the most exciting or thrilling way to live, but at least it’s safe.” The problem with such an approach is that it, too, is ultimately idolatry, cutting us off from the source of our deepest joy, our greatest purpose. Our faith proclaims that God took the ultimate risk—living and dying in human flesh—to redeem our living and our world. Our commitment to him is not just one of many loyalties competing for our time and devotion. If you want to follow Jesus, you must be all in.

A dear friend of mine and of this congregation, Rabbi Dennis Sasso, has recently announced his retirement after fifty years leading Congregation Beth-El Zedeck. Dennis was kind enough to send me the sermons he preached for the High Holy Days this fall. And as I read them, I found a message for us—a word of hope and challenge. The rabbi said to his congregation, “Judaism has never been static; it is always in process. This is no time for timidity; it is a time for daring. This is no time to close institutions; it is a time to revitalize and repurpose them, to open new venues, to imagine new possibilities. Someone has said that hopelessness is a failure of imagination. Well, it is time to imagine again.”

This year, Second Presbyterian Church has added sixty new members, half of whom are under forty years old. This is certainly a testament to the power of your hospitality, the ministry of this community. It’s something to celebrate. But my deepest joy comes in watching what happens when you move from dangling your feet in the water to complete and total immersion. It happens because you show up. You join the choir, or you teach a class, or you chaperone a trip, or you sign up for a retreat, or you find a small group. .or your child is dragging you to church on

Sunday morning. Anyone? It happens when you serve a neighbor, befriend the lonely, pray with a stranger. It happens when you find yourself lost in a purpose bigger than yourself. It happens all the time right here. And when it happens, I've seen it! When it happens, you're all in. You want others to have the same experience. You want to grow together.

It may not be sacred scripture, but T.S. Eliot once asked, "If you're not in over your head, how do you know how tall you are?" If you choose to bury what you have, if we proceed cautiously into the year ahead, we know exactly what will happen. No gains, no losses, no risks, no surprises, no change. But friends, there is no telling what might happen if we take the risk of investing our lives in God's expansive vision for our future. There is no telling what might happen if we challenge ourselves to be "all in" on that vision. Who knows what the future holds? I do believe this: It's time to grow. It's time to imagine. It's time to dream. Amen.