

The Rev. Canon Sue Reid

Sermon 11.16.14

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 and Matthew 25:14-30

Six years when my grandson was born my husband and I decided to open an education fund account for him. One of the questions the financial advisor asked was, "What level of risk do you want to take on your investment?" We discussed several options and decided that while he was younger the fund's investments would be at a greater level of risk than when he was in his mid teens and approaching the age in which he might actually use the money.

I thought of that conversation as I read today's Gospel. How risky are we willing to be? How adventurous, how much energy are we willing to put into the gifts we are given? What kind of fools for Christ are we willing to be?

The story that Jesus tells in today's Gospel may seem fairly straight forward. A man of some means gets ready for a journey and he calls together his trusted servants. He doesn't say how long he'll be gone. He doles out a significant chunk of his estate for these three slaves to manage. One talent in those days was worth about 15 years of wages for a day laborer. So one slave is given the equivalent of 75 years' wages, more than a lifetime in 1<sup>st</sup> century terms; one is given the equivalent of 30 years' wages and one is given the equivalent of 15 years' wages. That's a pretty healthy chunk of change for each of them.

And we hear what happened. The master returns and the two who had received the larger chunks of money risked it in investments and doubled the money they were given. There are not too many investments in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that would do that well. And then we have the third slave. He doesn't lose any of the master's money, but he certainly hasn't made a penny on top of what he had been given. He played it safe. He knew his master to be demanding and he wasn't willing to risk raising his ire.

Is that what being a Christian is about? Playing it safe? Not rocking the boat? Not sticking our necks out for those who have little voice of their own?

At this time of year particularly many churches are having their annual stewardship campaign and asking folks to make a pledge toward the budget of the coming year. And we get a lesson like this assigned in the lectionary and may think, “Oh yes, this makes perfect sense for this time of the year.” But that, of course, is **not** the reason for the text.

We’re winding down the church year. In two weeks it will be Advent and we will focus even more intently on the themes of Jesus the Christ coming into our world in the past and present and future. Matthew in his Gospel has three parables in a row about Jesus’ returning. We heard last week about the wise and foolish women and their lamps. Today, the slaves who were or were not prepared for their master’s return. And next week the third story calling us to account as Jesus’ followers.

We followers of Jesus live in several “both and” situations. We are people who through baptism are invited into a new life, an invitation that comes solely as a gift. And we are a people who are called to live into that invitation. Unearned grace **and** a response to this greatest of all gifts.

We are a people who have seen what the Reign of God looks like in the life and ministry of Jesus **and** we know we aren’t there yet.

We are a people who are given gifts and talents, not just monetary gifts, but the kind of gifts St. Paul mentions – preaching, teaching, administration, hospitality, healing and more – **and** yet it is our responsibility to use them. We can invest them daily or we can bury them in the ground.

We are people who live with one foot in each of two worlds, the already and the not yet. We strive to become the people God intends us to be while we live in the realities of daily life, putting a roof over our heads and bread on the table.

Perhaps the greatest challenge some of us have in our lives is to figure out the gifts we have that we are called to steward. I remember a conversation once with an older woman who was warm and giving and chaired the altar guild. She said, “I don’t have any gifts.” To anyone who knew her for any amount of time, her gifts were obvious, but not to her.

Stewarding what we have been given, what we have developed through investment in time and talent, through wise money management is a lifetime challenge.

Jacob Needleman in his book, Money and the Meaning of Life, suggests that part of that challenge is to recognize that money is to be used in the search for self-knowledge, to study ourselves as we are and as we can become. You know the standard line that our true identity can be found by looking at our checkbook register. In a sense that is what Jesus is saying to the three slaves in today's parable. How much are you willing to risk to be my loyal servant, my slave? How much is your relationship with me worth to you?

But we don't take on this search alone. At the root of Judaism and at the root of Christianity is our community. Paul writing to the Thessalonians said, "Encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing."

Some of us are able to step out in faith alone to try what seems impossible. Most of us need the support of others to make the first move and to keep traveling with us.

Today's Gospel invites us to move beyond stability, beyond the status quo. What do we see around us that needs our attention? What are we passionate about? What gifts might we have to offer to address this need? Who else might we enlist?

Today's collect is one of my favorites. It gives us a starting point in our quest to be faithful servants.

"Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ..."

It's not just the "hope of everlasting life" to which scripture leads us, it's a trail map for our journey in what may at times be a wilderness. In our inward digestion of today's Gospel we see Jesus as the master who encourages riskiness.

My sense is that even if the return had not been as great, the first two slaves would have been commended for not simply burying the talents in the ground. They took a risk.

What is it that God has given you to steward? How is money a tool to help you become more fully the person God intends you to be? Challenging questions as we approach Advent and prepare once again for our Lord's Coming. Amen.