

“MAKING THE MOST OF IT”  
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Matthew 25:14-30

I begin my sermon this morning with a confession. I’m a newspaper junkie. I love reading the newspaper. I start every morning reading the News Journal and three mornings a week I start with the Cecil Whig. Occasionally I’ll pick up the Guardian, and if I’m ever out of town, I’ll read whatever local newspaper is around, just to see what’s going on. I just love reading newspapers – and I love reading the actual paper – not the digital version. There’s just something about holding it in my hand while I’m drinking my morning coffee – I love it.

But you know what I’ve noticed? Over the years, I’ve come to pick up different sections first. Used to be, when I was younger, and the Phillies were winning, I’d go right to the sports section. When I entered ministry, and was serving a very large church, sadly, I’d turned to the obituaries first to see if anyone related to the church or someone in the church family had died.

Lately, a couple of different things have caught my fancy. On Fridays, in the Cecil Whig, in the very back section, there’s a little article called “Cherry Hill News.” I think it’s a hoot, and I can’t wait to see what the author writes. It could be about some event at Cherry Hill United Methodist Church or it could be about her stomach bug last week after which she lost five pounds!

The other things that pique my interest right now are in the News Journal. One is on the backside of the front page – it’s a column by a guy named Jeff Gentry who used to work for the Cecil Whig. He writes about everyday life, and some of it is pretty funny.

The other thing that interests me might surprise you – it’s an article that appears weekly in the USA Today portion of the News Journal about retirement, and tips for retirement. All of a sudden, in the last few years, I’ve begun to sit up and take notice of things about retirement – since I just turned 59 and retirement will come around for me sometime in the next decade.

These articles are mostly about money, and how to be prepared for retirement. I find them alternately very informative and somewhat scary. Every time I read them I revisit that eternal question – “Will I have enough money for my retirement?”

It is an eternal question, because it seems like we, from a very young age, ask ourselves that very question – “do I” or “will I” have enough money for me? From a very young age, we’re given advice about money. And from a very young age, we’re constantly being barraged with two messages – from one corner we hear “make as much as you can and take care of yourself” and then from a million other corners voices try to entice us to buy this or buy that. The whole advertising industry is based on wooing us into buying stuff.

And now, today, in this morning’s Gospel lesson, Jesus is asking us to think about our treasure, our money, and what we do with it. The term used in the New Revised Standard Version is talent, but talent was the largest standard of money in Biblical times. To be given talents, was to be given a great deal of money.

And that’s what the master in the parable did – he gave three servants talents. To one, he gave five; to another, two; to another, one. And then he went away. When he came back, he wanted an accounting of what they had done with the gift he had given them.

The first man had apparently been very industrious, for he had taken the five talents, traded with them, and made five talents more. The second man, likewise, took his two talents, traded with them, and made two talents more. But the third man had taken his one talent, buried it in the ground, conceivably to keep it safe and not lose anything – and so when the master returned, he had but one talent to show for it.

Now, at first glance, the master’s anger at that third man might make us wonder. I mean, the guy played it safe – he didn’t lose anything. The first two guys could have, in the midst of trading, lost everything! He wasn’t about to take that chance.

And that angered the master.

And, Jesus said, that angers God as well. Why? Because it shows a complete lack of trust in God, our Master. The third man had been given a generous gift from his master, and instead of doing something with it, he cowered in fear and played it safe; while the other two took the generous gifts given them and used them to return even more to the one who gave them.

Friends, all of us have been given great gifts from God – all of us – no matter how much or how little we have. God has entrusted to us so many things, and He wants us to do something with what He has given us. The trouble is that our world, in so many ways, tells us to “bury it,” if you will – to stash it away for ourselves. And particularly, in tough economic times, the temptation is to do just that. But that is fear-based, and God asks us to be “faith-based” with the gifts He gives us.

It’s actually a great adventure to which God calls us – to step out in faith and give out of what we have been given. I can tell you this, the first two servants had a whole lot more fun with their money, than did the third one. The first two servants

had a sense of adventure, a sense of “imagine what I can do with this” than did the third one, whose mantra was, “I need to keep a tight grip on this or I’ll lose it.”

You see, I think that’s the bottom line of this parable – God’s invitation to all of us to the great adventure of giving from what we have received; and the great thrill of stepping out in faith and taking risks for the kingdom. I don’t think God wants us to play it safe – Jesus never did.

I mean, look at the whole of Jesus’ life – He never played it safe. When he faced the devil in the wilderness of temptation, and the devil offered him food and fame and wealth, everything that would lead to comfort and safety, Jesus said no, and stepped into the unknown future God had planned for Him.

And all along his journey, He turned to those places and people from whom others turned away – whether it was unclean people, or difficult situations – Jesus never hung back and played it safe.

And at the end of His life, when He knelt in the Garden of Gethsemane, instead of turning away from the cross, He got up and walked toward it, confident in God’s plan and God’s love.

Jesus never played it safe – He always stepped out in faith, knowing that He did not go alone – that God his Father was with Him, and would always give Him everything He needed. And that, friends, is what He calls us to do as well – in all aspects of our lives. To step out in faith, to not play it safe – to live fully and faithfully for God and His kingdom.

I think, as a church, we’ve done pretty well at that. There have been plenty of times we could have played it safe throughout the course of our history. Every time this church has built, it was pretty risky. I can’t imagine that there was any time that this church undertook a building project – whether it was the education wing in the 50’s, Weldin Hall in the 70’s or even the Wesley Wing a few years ago – where we were sitting on a pile of money and could pay for the new building with cash. No, every single time it was a leap of faith, but we did it, because we trusted that God, the giver of all our gifts, would make a way – and so He has!

And we’ve done it in so many other ways as well! Why, in the course of the past fifteen years, our missions budget has gone from 20,000 dollars to 50,000 dollars – and might I remind you that was through tough economic times for our country. When the world directed us to be stingy and save it for ourselves, we stepped out in faith and gave it to God for others in need.

I could go on and on – we’ve taken the gifts God has given us and increased our ministries, our staff, and our outreach to the community around us. Just look around and you’ll see the fruits of our giving – Sunday School rooms packed to overflowing, all adorned with new video monitors for creative learning experiences; a music ministry that keeps growing and growing so much that we have to add seats to the choir loft and new robes for the children’s choir; hundreds of bags of

groceries given for the hungry, and two weeks of care for those in the Rotating Homeless Shelter; taking programs like Joy of Faith out of the church and into the community to reach others for Christ; partnering with Thomson Estates Elementary School to touch the lives of young people from our area – I could go on and on – but friends, none of those things would be possible if we “buried our treasure in the ground.” It’s because we step out in faith, trusting in the goodness of our God, the giver of all our gifts, that we have done what we have done.

And now, next week, we all have decisions to make about what we’ll do with our “treasures” in 2015. Each of us is, in reality, like one of those servants in the parable. To each of us God has given gifts, and each of us has to decide what we will do with them. Will we cling to them tightly, protecting them, hoarding them, fear losing them; or will we trust God and step out in faith, and use them creatively, freely and fully?

Many of you have probably heard of a pastor by the name of Rick Warren. He wrote the book *The Purpose Driven Life*, which I know many of you have read. In talking about this particular parable, Rick Warren said this: “There are three things you can do with your life; you can waste it, you can spend it, or you can invest it.”

“You can waste it. There are plenty of things to waste it on. You can spend it on your career, on your hobby, on acquiring certain possessions, or you can invest it. Jesus taught that the greatest use of your life is to invest it in that which outlasts it.” (Rick Warren, “How to Invest Your Life,” [preaching.com](http://preaching.com))

He’s right. Jesus invites us to step out in faith and use what we have been given for God’s glory. Don’t play it safe!

You know, Rick Warren went on to say that when he died, he wanted four words printed on his tombstone. And these are the four words: “At least he tried!” He said, “I may not reach all the goals I believe God has given me for my life, but it really doesn’t matter. What matters is the effort – trying! Trying to make your life count, trying to make an impact with your life, trying to do something significant that is going to outlast you. It’s not whether you reach it or not, it’s the effort that counts. Doing nothing (he says) is inexcusable.” (Ibid)

I think that’s what the master in the parable said as well. Doing nothing is inexcusable. Do something, just do something with what you’ve been given. Trust God, step out in faith, do something.

You have the opportunity, with your giving to Christ through this church, to touch lives, to change lives, to make the world a better place. I’m inviting you today to be a part of this great adventure – of seeing the amazing things that God can do through the gifts we offer. So I pray that you will spend this next week in prayer, asking God to give you what you need to step out in faith and give fully and faithfully to His work in the world.

I want to finish by reminding you that what you give matters. No matter how much you have, what you give matters. Your giving makes a difference.

Phyllis Bixler gave me a book to read recently called *Be the Message* by Keri and Chris Shook. Near the end of the book they wrote this:

“Several years ago we wrote a declaration to the Lord acknowledging the power of one life placed in His hands and committing our lives to His purpose. We call it our ‘One Life Declaration’ and it helps us remember that God changes the world one life at a time. Every life matters to God.

Our declaration says:

I believe with all my heart that two thousand years ago the sacrifice of one life, Jesus Christ, changed my one life for all eternity.

I believe Jesus Christ gave His life for every life; therefore, it is impossible to measure the value of one life.

So I declare that as long as there is one life than has never experienced the love of Christ, as long as there is –

- One child without clean water
- One mother afflicted with AIDS
- One family with no shelter
- One man who is homeless and hungry
- One teenager who feels hopeless
- One person who has never heard the gospel

I will do whatever it takes, with whatever I have, with my one and only life to help one more person experience Christ’s love.

I refuse to live in a selfish bubble in my own little world by closing my eyes to the hurting and hopeless all around me.

I refuse to come to the end of my life and realize I missed my one and only chance with my one and only life to give my all to the One who gave His life for me. (Keri and Chris Shook, *Be the Message*)

My friends, I can’t say it any better. Refuse to get to the end of your life and realize that you missed your chance to give it all to the One who gave it all for you. Step out in faith, trust in God, give with generosity, join God’s great adventure! May it be so!

Amen.