

SUBSTANCE ABUSE¹
Matthew 25: 14-30
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens
November 16, 2008

In the Viennese Waltz a hesitation step is a moment of grace. It is followed by an explosion of emotive movement. If you have been hesitating to fill out this year's pledge card to support the ministries of this church, now is the time for an emotive explosion of faith! All the ministries we support are straining under the current economic crisis. Those on the front lines of help, who provide emergency assistance in the form of food and clothing and shelter and heat, those who counsel and support and bolster up those who are teetering on the brink of financial collapse, all need our help more than ever.

Our commitment to the ministries of this church does not come just in good times. It is in those hard times that the church is needed the most. So I urge you not to hesitate, but to let this day, this moment in our time of worship, be a time of great emotive moment, so that in pledging our budget we all share in the dance of faith.

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I

Given the current state of the stock market, I wonder if Jesus would have told the parable we read today in the same way? The story has two heroes and one villain. The villain is the servant who took the money and saved it. The heroes are the ones who invested the money. Of course, today the story could very well be turned on its head! The two servants who invested their money could very well have lost it all! And the servant who dug a hole and saved it could be the only one who had any of the money left to return to the owner.

Let's take a look at this story and see what we can glean from it in these economic times. It begins with a man who was going on a journey. He called his three servants together and entrusted to them his property. He left everything he had in the hands of three servants, and then he disappears! What kind of irresponsibility is that? Just when they need him most for advice and guidance, just when the days are difficult and the market is mercurial, the expert leaves it all to the servants.

Clearly the image is of God and us. God has given us great resources, and then it appears that God just disappears and leaves it to us to make our own decisions!

In the story, when the owner returns, the first two servants have invested their capital and doubled it. But the attention of the story is focused on the third servant who was afraid and cautious and reticent to take any chances with his money. So he buries it in the backyard and is able to return it all to the owner. But to his surprise, he is condemned for his fearful caution, and the money is given to the first servant, who already has ten talents. The condemnation is quite harsh: he is called wicked and lazy!

Then comes the line, that terrible phrase, that leaves us baffled: *...to those who have shall more be given. And from those who have not, even the little they have, shall be taken away.* What can we say about such a statement? Is that a fitting thing to read from a Christian pulpit? To those who have, they will receive more? To the Wall Street tycoons who already get Christmas bonuses in the millions, to the professional athletes who measure their contracts in seven figures? More? And to the struggling, minimum wage burger-turner, even what little they have will be taken away? Is that what this text is saying?

II

We are prompted to ask, where is the grace in this story? It seems so harsh, so cruel, so un-Christian! Where is the grace in this master who

is so tough on this well-intentioned, entirely honest and scrupulous servant?

I wish there might have been a fourth servant in this story, a servant who went out, like the first two, and invested what he had from the master, and lost his shirt in the stock market! I wonder what the story would have said if that fourth servant came back to the master and said, *Well, master, it's like this. It seemed like a sure thing. Everyone at the Merrill-Lynch office said it was a sure bet. I was as careful as possible, but the stock market just tanked! All I can give you is a sincere apology.*

What would Jesus have had the master say then? Well, if he is anything like the Jesus revealed in other parts of the gospels, he is always lifting up the failures of the world, having compassion on the losers and the downtrodden. Remember what he said to the woman taken in adultery? *Neither do I condemn you. Go, and sin no more.* He was always taking the failures, lifting them up, forgiving them, and sending them on their way. Remember what the father said when the prodigal son came home and said, *Dad, I blew it!* *Bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.* Jesus has a track record of compassion for people who have blown it. But unfortunately, there is no

fourth servant in this story, and we can edit it and put one in! So, where's the grace and forgiveness in this story?

Truth is, grace permeates the story, if you look at it closely. It runs throughout the whole account. It is there from the very first line. Did you hear it? The master is going away on a journey and he summons his three servants and gave them· not SOME of the money, not just a little cash to tide them over until he got back. What does the text say? It says that he gave them everything! He *divided his substance* among them. He took everything he had, every last cent of it, and put it into their care. Which means that when he got back, everything of what he has· his entire estate· has been utterly dependent on what they have done with his substance. If they have blown it, he is bankrupt. He has given them everything until he gets back.

The moment of their accounting is indeed an hour of judgment, but it is the master who has really taken the risk here! There's the grace! He gave them his whole substance, everything he had, every cent. Before we get too resentful of this tough master, put yourself in his place. He gave them everything he had!

III

It is worth noting that this is a story that Jesus tells toward the end, just before he begins his journey toward the cross. He is about to leave his disciples, who have been gifted with more than they know. He must have wondered how his disciples would use the gifts God had given them. His concerns about them must have been, not that they would be too careless, but that they would be too careful. They would abuse the substance of what God had given them by being too careful with it. In other words, substance abuse is not being too risky, but being too careful with what God has given us!

This is what the third servant didn't understand. He totally missed it. If you are afraid to take a risk with what God has given you, then the only thing left to do is to go to the back yard and bury it. Once the money is buried, there are no decisions to be made. There is no chance of defeat, but then again there is no chance of victory. There is nothing there but a hole in the ground and a whole lot of money. And the third servant is standing guard over his buried money, tied to it out of fear of losing it. His money becomes a ball and chain to him! That hole becomes his grave!

The other two servants, on the other hand, were willing to take a risk. And when they give an accounting, they hear those great words, *You've*

been faithful over a little; I'll put you over much....Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy.... They got the joy of experiencing some of the extravagance that characterizes the way the master does business. The story is clearly suggesting that the master is looking for a few wheeler-dealers with whom to wheel and deal!

Friends, stewardship Sunday is a time to wheel and deal. We are not asking for a 10% gratuity for God. Our pledge has nothing to do with giving a tip to God for serving us! God is not a divine waiter at our life's table! God has put the whole world into our hands. God has entrusted to us God's whole property. That is grace! We delude ourselves when we think that what we have is ours. It all belongs to God! The question is, what are we going to do with it? Hoard it? Bury it in a back yard CD?

Where are the wheeler-dealers of our age? They are the ones who take great chances with God's substance and invest it in things that are of eternal significance. This little pledge card that we will place in the offering plate does not represent something we are giving to God! God already owns everything we have. It represents the joyful wheeling and dealing we are willing to do with God's money.

If there is a problem with our church budget, it is not that it is too high, but that it is far too low. Wouldn't it be wonderful if those of us who have

already filled out our pledge cards just marked through them right now and started over to do some real wheeling and dealing- taking some risks!

Wouldn't it be wonderful if in these hard economic times we invested our resources in a way that allowed us to expand our ministries in this church?

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we oversubscribed our budget so that we would have to call a special business meeting to ask, "How would you like to use these additional funds?"+

IV

Are these just wild speculations? Are we giving up because the economic times are difficult? Are we going to be happy just to go along with business as usual? Or is this the kind of wheeling and dealing investment of God's money that this parable calls for? I think the answer is obvious, and it is going to take every single one us- young and old, rich and poor, working and retired, and I can even add- members and regular visitors.

Don't miss out on the chance to have some fun with God's money! Take some risks, and let this moment be an explosion of faith. Then listen for that still, small voice saying, *Well done, good and faithful servant.*