

SERMON
Church of the Holy Communion, Memphis, Tennessee
The Reverend Alexander H. Webb II (“Sandy”)
November 16, 2014

The Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 28A)
Revised Common Lectionary
Matthew 25:14-30

“The Parable of the Diversified Portfolio”

In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

In this morning’s reading from St. Matthew’s Gospel, we hear the famous Parable of the Five Talents. However, I would like to suggest a new name for this familiar tale: The Parable of the Diversified Portfolio.

Consider a retelling of the same: Susan has eight million dollars to invest, and she divides it among three managers, each according to his ability. Susan knows the abilities of each manager because she has studied their prospectuses. She puts the lion’s share of her money with managers that promise remarkable rates of return, but she keeps one of her millions in something safer.

We might say that Susan put 87.5% of her portfolio in high-risk equities, and 12.5% in low-risk fixed income. By today’s standards, Susan’s allocation is quite aggressive, and her low-risk million will be important if the markets turn sour.

When it comes time for Susan to calculate her capital gains, she is delighted. The first two managers have delivered on their promises and doubled her investment. However, when Susan opens her third annual statement, the news is bad. The third manager has done absolutely nothing with her money. For fear of losing even a penny, he hid her cash under his mattress, and did not even deposit it in a savings account to earn simple interest.

Susan is outraged. She knew the third manager’s abilities in advance. She knew that he was not going to realize a large return, but she wanted him at least to do something. Doing nothing was not an option. If Susan had wanted her money to lay fallow, she would have held onto it herself.

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St. Matthew’s Gospel is a difficult read, largely because of parables like this one. More than any of the other Gospels, Matthew forces us to acknowledge that God has high standards for how we live the Christian life. The Jesus that Matthew portrays will not say grace over the sin, and shortcomings, and fears of the world. Matthew’s Jesus speaks the truth plainly, in the boldest of terms, and insists that we adjust our lives accordingly.

All too often, we reject parables that speak of judgment. We prefer to leave God’s anger in the Old Testament and focus on his grace in the New Testament. But, Matthew reminds us that our God is not so easily divided. Religious commentator James Carroll recently put it this way on the opinion

page of the *New York Times*: “Jesus did not proclaim a New Testament God of love against an Old Testament God of judgment...Rather, as a Shema-reciting son of Israel, he proclaimed the one God, whose judgment comes as love.”¹

Jesus’ words ring hard on our ears, because we know that we routinely fall short of God’s expectations. But, the truth lies just beyond the horizon of our discomfort. We miss the point if we reject the parables that make us uncomfortable.

Theologian Verna Dozier reminds us, “The God of the Bible is both for us and over against us. To lose either side of that paradox...is to miss the God of the Hebrew-Christian faith...[The Bible] bears witness to the fact that God is not defeated by the wretchedness of human beings and can use even that wretchedness to work out glorious purposes. *That* is the biblical faith.”² As it is with us and our children, anger and frustration do not equate with an absence of love.

Matthew’s gospel is challenging because it rejects the popular and comfortable view that we can celebrate God’s grace without acknowledging the sins that make God’s grace necessary. We need to reflect on both if we are to understand the fullness of God’s love, if we are to understand why Christ will soon lay down his life in order to save the very people that his parables now admonish.

But, make no mistake, Matthew *does not* reject grace itself. The Gospel is, after all, Good News, and no one is more optimistic than Matthew about what this world will be once it has been subsumed into the Kingdom of God. The point of this parable is love, not judgment. Anger and wrath enter in at the end, but the most important words are at the beginning: “[A man] summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them...”

God entrusts his property to his servants, and they assume a fiduciary responsibility to the one from whom all blessings flow, an obligation to use his resources for the advancement of the Kingdom. None may “stand idle on the harvest plain...”³

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One of the best parts of my job is looking at all of your wonderful faces on Sunday morning, both from the pulpit and from the altar. In your eyes, I see hope and expectation, joy and possibility.

As I read this particular parable before this particular congregation at this particular time, there is no way that I can identify us with anyone in this story except the slave to whom the master gave five talents, the manager through whom Susan made her largest investment.

Collectively and individually, our blessings are myriad: A joyful spirit, a commitment to our future, a love of inquiry, a bumper crop of children, a well-stocked treasury, an engaged lay leadership, a talented staff, a beautiful campus, a great location, a ministry-enriching school partnership, a city that is redefining itself before our eyes, and a truly remarkable capacity for social and civic influence.

¹ James Carroll. “Jesus and the Modern Man.” *The New York Times*. November 7, 2014. Accessed online: http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/09/opinion/sunday/can-i-stay-with-the-church.html?mwrsm=Email&_r=0

² Verna Dozier. *The Dream of God: A Call to Return*. New York: Seabury, 2006. 15-16. Emphasis added.

³ Jane Laurie Borthwick (1813-1897). *The Hymnal 1982*, Hymn 541.

God has blessed us in these ways with the intention that we will use all of our resources – financial and otherwise – for his greater glory, not so that we can hide them under our mattresses. We have everything that we need to advance the Kingdom in ways unlike anything the Mid-South has ever seen. But, the choice is ours.

If we choose to live in a spirit of scarcity, holding our resources tightly for fear of an uncertain future, our moment will pass with a whimper. If we choose to live in a spirit of abundance, sharing our blessings as lavishly as God first shared them with us, we will see the world transformed by our faith.

Be bold, my friends. Live into your abundance. And, be amazed at what God will do.

Amen.