

## *Investment Opportunity*

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*Text: 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11*

Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When they say, 'There is peace and security', then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labour pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then, let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

*Matthew 25:14-30*

'For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, "Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents." His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." And the one with the two talents also came

forward, saying, “Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.” His master said to him, “Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.” Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, “Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.” But his master replied, “You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

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*May God bless to our understanding these words from the Holy Scriptures.*

I guess this just proves that context is everything. In market conditions like the ones prevailing now, the man who buried the talent might have come out ahead! And it does make us wonder what the master in the parable might have said to someone who took the talents, traded with them and lost half their value.

This parable of Jesus raises our anxiety on many different levels. It reminds us of all the times we didn't practice the piano, or study hard. It also jars our sense that it is wise to be careful. If your employer gave you twenty times your annual income and said, look after it for me, how many risks would you take? And, at present, putting it in a savings account wouldn't net you much. (Or on second thought, why didn't they just run away?)

Worse, the story portrays the master – whom we imagine must be God – as almost a figure from Kafka. A person who is completely without compassion, so offended by the fearfulness of the third servant that he calls him worthless and casts him out, to the fearful place where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. But really, don't you think the man had a point there? I mean, no wonder he was afraid. Look what happened to him. And anyway, what happened to the last shall be first?

So all this is jangling around in our brain as we try to hear what Jesus is saying. [And let me add a note on interpretation – this is the difference between a parable and a simple morality tale. A morality tale gives a sweet little lesson in what to think. But a parable destabilizes, intentionally – and leaves the listeners struggling a bit. So that you can work it over for two thousand years and still not be finished with it.]

Even so, I think we can understand something of the point Jesus is making. Jesus says, again and again, step up. He says, do not be defined by your weakness. Do not operate out of your fear. According to an article I read this week, the Bible says in 365 different places, do not fear, [or fear not]. And everyone needs to hear this. I was afraid, says the third servant, and who doesn't know what this feels like? Afraid to speak up, afraid to act, afraid to take a chance, afraid to look like a fool, afraid of dying. We all have fears – but Jesus says, don't let your fears set the pace.

We hear it in the Thessalonians passage that Eric read too. There Paul says to the new Christians, don't be hiding under the bed waiting for the second coming. Of course you don't know what will happen or when, but live fully, in the broad daylight. Put on, as he wonderfully says, the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet, hope of salvation. Wear that. There is a kind of cheerful insouciance, a kind of gladness and nonchalance, that seems to be part of the Christian life, both as Paul presents it and in the stories of Jesus. Be confident, they seem to say, not because you know the outcome, but because you don't. Instead, be alert for an outcome that surprises you.

Here is a story, from a TV movie I recall seeing as a child, in the fifties. I may have it wrong, but if you recognize it please tell me, because I'd like to find it.

The movie is about a middle-aged couple living in New York City. They are not well off, their apartment is cramped, they are unhappy with each other and with their lives. Irritable, cranky, critical. The man has a job working underground, repairing subway tunnels and tracks. But in his spare time he reads about diamonds and dreams of becoming rich. We hear him reading aloud to his wife that diamonds are found in yellow dirt – and she sneers at him. Then one day as he is digging in the subway tunnel, his pick lands in yellow dirt and he is galvanized. He is certain that if only he can get at this patch of dirt, he will find diamonds and all the wealth he longs for. His strategy – he calibrates the location and sets about getting a permit to open a newsstand over the spot. Grudgingly, his wife joins him in this little piece of craziness. They build the thing, stock up on papers and magazines, chocolate-bars and gum, and open up shop. While she sells their wares, he is digging down through the sidewalk and into the earth below. They have to go slowly so as not to attract attention, and he too takes his turn at the cash. Bit by bit they build up a clientele, and they pass the time of day in the sunshine as newspapers and candy-bars change hands. Even in the

rain, they rather enjoy the camaraderie. His efforts take a very long time, but eventually – eureka, yellow dirt! He takes a sample and goes off to have it checked for diamonds. Guess what happens – no diamonds. No fabulous wealth, no lifelong freedom from the grind of work. But here is the thing, they notice that they have become happy. They have connected with their neighbours, they are enjoying each others' company, and they have a thriving little business. Their lives have been transformed, beyond diamonds really.

If we are open to it, life can bring blessings that are unforeseen. I think what Jesus is saying in the parable of the talents is like this. When life presents an investment opportunity, not only should we step up, but also, he says, be prepared for a surprise. The first and second servants don't just have to give back the money – instead they are to carry on as investors, and even more amazing, to enter the joy of the master. Come celebrate with me, says the master, in one translation.

This is crystal clear when you are raising children. You do have to do the work – but be prepared to be amazed by the joy of it, by the way it changes you. Maybe a touch less obvious, but church membership is the same – pitch in, we say, get those books sold, reach out in compassion to others, sing in the choir, *and* be prepared for unexpected happiness, see how it feels to be wearing a helmet of hope.

Collectively too – a great deal of work has been put into the preparation of a proposal for redevelopment of this site that would allow us to offer space to the national church, the General Council Office. (If you haven't already, have a look at the proposal on the website.) And the General Council Executive is discussing this weekend whether they will want to take us up on it. Of course we hope so. Of course we hope they don't decide to go somewhere else, or stay where they are. But whatever the outcome there, we have now got a proposal that looks pretty promising. It's exciting. It's an investment opportunity – investment of faith and hope and love. With or without the General Council Offices, I think we are in for some unexpected and transforming times.

So let us follow the advice that Eric read to us from the Apostle Paul – *encourage one another and build one another up* – and he adds, *as indeed you are doing*.

Thanks be to God. Amen.