

Your One Wild and Precious Life

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Matthew 25:14-30

Parable of the Three Investors

I don't like this morning's parable. It's not my cup of tea. It's about investments. Now I'm smart enough about money. I let the UCC Pension Boards handle my pension funds, they weigh the risks for me. I try to live well within my means and practice the modern tithe. I work with a good Business Administrator who manages the money of this church wisely. This way, I don't have to think about money all the time. Like I said, it's not my cup of tea.

Ironically, this past week while studying and reflecting on this parable of the three investors, I was also trying to meet, via phone and computer, with a financial advisor provided by the UCC Pension Boards. Easier said than done! Trying to communicate via phone, where there's little personal connection, through the different languages of finance and computereez, getting through all the computer security, and Dorothy of Ernst and Young was not getting my occasional clever quips about the parable I was working on—well! it proved enormously frustrating at the end of the day. I said: "Let's try again next week". Politely, but with barely concealed frustration, she said "Yup!" All I want to do is transfer more of my increasingly-conservative-later-in-my-career-investment portfolio into the UCC socially responsible investment fund... ie. get out of fossil fuels. I will persist.

This parable is aggravating. It goes against the expected pattern of folk tales, with the first two characters getting it wrong and then the third one getting it right. This feels topsy turvy: Here, the third one gets it wrong. Even allowing for this mind-altering swerve in the story, not atypical of Jesus' teaching style, he wants to shake things loose in the listener's mind, this parable suggests that the rich should get richer and the poor poorer. Those who have, and make more, will get rich. Those with less, who are not entrepreneurial, will have that little taken away from them. That's Jesus message?!

I thought to myself, I bet the prosperity gospel preachers love this bible story. Have you heard of the prosperity gospel? It is a largely mega church movement, kind of an offshoot of Norman Vincent Peale's theology. The heart of the prosperity gospel is this: If you have faith, God will prosper you and you will get rich. Wealth accumulation is the sign of God's grace. Therefore! Have at! It's not pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by. It's pie right now and lots of it! So, I googled prosperity gospel and behold, there it was, in the Wikipedia site, among just a few other scripture passages. The parable of the three investors. It is one of the core prosperity gospel passages. Aha! I was right, I thought! with glee and then disgust...

But I kept mulling over this passage. What's wrong with this picture? It became increasingly troubling to me. Now I don't think we need to defend every story that makes it into this ancient library, the bible, but I want to make sure we're not missing something...

I must have been mulling through the night, after reading and re reading many commentaries, and the next morning, after my first sip of gloriously strong French Roast coffee, before anyone in the house awakened, even my dog was still sleeping, it came to me...

The parables of Jesus are not about the pursuit of happiness for individuals and their children and grandchildren. The parables are about life abundant for everyone, together, the kingdom of God. The parable is not a privatistic gospel. It is always, always a social gospel. The parable, every parable, is political, social, personal, universal all at the same time. The parables of Jesus are about how God wants us to live on this planet, sustainably, justly, peacefully, joyfully, together.

I had had on the – *what's good for me*- glasses when I was reading this parable. Not the *what's good for us* glasses.

Now! What might this parable mean?

I wonder if it's a way to get us thinking about the generosity of the creator... all of these gifts around us are given freely, profligately... and we are stewards of all of these gifts... and these gifts must keep moving, they must never stop, never be cautiously buried in the ground, or safe guarded, or hoarded, but rather we must prosper them, make them grow exponentially... all in service to the kingdom of God. I wonder if it's saying that when it comes to our mission, we are called to be entrepreneurial, to go out on a limb, to not play it safe, to have a fiery passion for prospering, growing God's dream of justice. When it comes to our labor for the social gospel, strategy is important. Wisdom is essential. But prudence will not do. Timidity is not a virtue. Boldness is. And yes, there is a risk in every real investment we make. There is an unknown. It's called the future. But by God! What a privilege to see how wonderful it is when people take a risk of investing their time, talent and money, our tithing- 5 % to church and 5% to other good causes, our legacy gift through our wills, for the sake of the kingdom of God.

I once visited a beautiful little church, let's call it a 1 talent church, remember one talent is still worth a lot. (One talent is worth 20 years of a laborer's wages.) I went in and exclaimed: Wow! Is this a brand-new building? They said, "no, it's been here for a while, but!," they proudly added, "we only use it on Sunday so it stays in good shape". The church closed not long after.

What about Mayflower? How are we doing with this gift entrusted to us? This building. This parcel of land. How are we prospering the kingdom of God with all of this?

Let's open our eyes and see what we really have here. Now, it's not a downtown cathedral church, say a 5-talent church. Is it more like a 2 or 3 or 4 talent church? This property is a prime piece of real estate in this city, a prosperous city. There's a lot of space in the building and a lot of space around it. (When you go out today to see the garden, know that five years ago, the city was testing this soil, concerned that it may be contaminated by the dry cleaning business that was once nearby, but after we got a clean bill of health, our gardeners descended, bestowing their care and talent on this little strip of land and it is now prospering! Bountiful with pollinator, and monarch friendly and watershed friendly plants, this little slice of land not only heals our souls with beauty, but it is healing the earth.) Let us open our eyes, see anew, and perceive the possibilities of this land and this building.

And let's awaken to the history of this place, and what the claims this particular history might make on us. It was Dakota land. And in the 19th and 20th centuries, it was the land of racial covenants, the heart of it, in the Diamond Lake area. Let's learn about all of this, uncover this hidden history, understand it, care about it...

And! let's root ourselves in the story of this church; it's creation story in 1925, how the founders named it Mayflower *Community* Congregational church that it might ever serve the wider community. And true to its name this church has always had groups coming and going—support groups, scouts, childcare centers, and more and more and more....Mayflower also has a threat-to-its-existence story, not a flood, nor a plague, but a highway cutting right through the neighborhood, cutting right through its identity as a neighborhood church. But she, Mayflower, persisted. The story of her constant evolving, her structures changing, both governance and buildings. She's never been rigid. She's been a good neighbor, but sometimes her call to the gospel has made her neighbors angry for a spell, and now there are new neighbors.... More beautiful human diversity in this corner of the city. 11 years ago, a little house over there was moved and in its place a big building went up, 30 units of workforce housing... built... on our land... what was our land... we partnered in building this.... prospering the kingdom of God, here and now.

Turn your head and look this way and see this courtyard with the big protective oak tree at the center and imagine the weekdays, how the young children play joyfully, right next to the columbarium, the ancestors. This too is a snapshot of the kingdom of God. 9 years ago we created the Mayflower early childhood center with a heart especially for low income kids and a mission of serving them best through an economically diverse student body. Now there are 100 children and dozens of teachers and assistants, throughout the week, right here—diverse economically, diverse racially, diverse culturally, diverse religiously, children with two mommies or two daddies, the most amazing, wondrous diversity! The kingdom of God....

Now look up and see the solar... 6 years ago.... 100 solar panels and we also put in energy saving technology throughout the building and declared our intent to move to carbon neutrality by 2030. (The last 30 % or more ahead of us will be the most difficult...)

These are investments that prosper the kingdom of God. This is good. This is faithful. This is walking the talk.

And we've learned something else. Yes we have! To talk about the walk. To expend half of our time on walking the talk and half of our time on talking about the walk. We use our building as a vehicle for prophetic speech. We tell our story in hopes that it will spread like mustard seed. Not only do we partner in building workforce housing in a high-income neighborhood with access to great public schools, but we spread the gospel. Beacon tells Mayflower's story to congregations all over the metro area, to say: this is possible! Not only did we install solar and proclaim our intent to move to carbon neutrality, but we spread the gospel of solar everywhere. We go talk to other churches. They call us. We say: it is possible! And now, there is a percolating dream, talk to Beth Kittelson, that we will spread the gospel of mixed income, high quality early childhood education centers in congregations: It is possible!

It's great to walk the talk. But it's not enough. We have to spread the gospel of possibility, of hope... Could it be that our building is a parable of the Kingdom of God?

And we are not done! There's more to do... Can I get an amen?

In the year ahead. Let's open our eyes to what we really have here. Know the history of this land and this city and this our church. Be wide awake to the strange and challenging times we live in and what is needed. Imagine the next 25 years of this church, what we are shaping for the babies now in our arms. But most of all, let us wonder together how we might best prosper the kingdom of God with this piece of land and this building that is entrusted to us?

Is it time once again for us as a community to listen deeply for the answer to the big question? Mayflower church, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?

As for this parable of the three investors, oh my, it's like playing with fire...stirring up the holy spirit!

Sources

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