

*Investing in the Vision*

Matthew 25:14-30

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Donna Claycomb Sokol

Mount Vernon Place UMC, Washington

Charles and his wife, Dana, worshipped with us when they were in town for a meeting more than six years ago. Since that initial visit, they now ensure every trip to Washington includes time to be with our community on Sunday morning. Charles is always one of the individuals to like every post shared on the church's Facebook account. He participated in one of our virtual small groups during the pandemic. To say he is a cheerleader would be an understatement. But we do not regularly chat—which made his text a bit alarming.

"You got time to talk?" it read, pushing my mind to ponder if something bad had happened.

I responded, letting him know I was wrapping up dinner with a friend. I then placed the call the moment I got inside my car when I quickly learned nothing was wrong. Instead, Charles expressed condolences for the recent loss of my stepmother before sharing how he had read her obituary, provoking him to look and see how far my dad's home in Missouri is from their home in St. Louis. Charles then said, "We can drive you there, Donna. Please do not rent a car if you're flying into St. Louis. We want to take you to your dad's for the service."

Charles provided a rather profound example of what it might look like to actively bless those who mourn. It is one I will ponder when I am wondering how I can care for people experiencing similar losses.

Are his words and offer what it looks like to multiply the treasure entrusted to us?

Mother Emmanuel AME Church is a place I wanted to visit when we were in Charleston several years ago because of the congregation's response to a horrific massacre that took place in their church. It was a mere two days after the mass shooting when relatives of the victims stood up one by one, looked a young man named Dylan in the eyes, and spoke the Gospel. "You took something very precious from me, but I forget you." "You hurt a lot of people, but may God forgive you." "We welcomed you Wednesday night in our Bible study with open arms. You have killed some of the most beautifullest people that I know...but may God have mercy on your soul."

I think about these words when I am faced with an opportunity to forgive someone. Are their words what it sounds like to multiply the treasure entrusted to us?

Last week, I watched a video shared by *The Guardian* about a young woman who was born and raised in Jerusalem. Sarah Vardi refused to be conscripted into the Israeli military service when she was a teenager, a conviction that punished her by sending her to prison three times. But Vardi is unafraid of any consequences she might endure for living a life that is contrary to the values of many people in her nation. Today, she spends much of her time in villages in the West Bank where she embodies a presence designed to protect Palestinians from Israeli settlers who live on their private Palestinian land. Vardi describes how Palestinians are no longer allowed to shepherd their sheep or harvest their olives, even though it is time for their harvest. She describes how most communities in the West Bank are not connected to a water grid and how settlers come and drill holes in their water containers, depleting them of whatever

water they do have. Today, Vardi is part of a team of people who bring food into different villages while seeking to make their voices heard. At the end of the clip, Vardi proclaims a message of peace. “While we are all in a huge amount of pain about what happened on October 7, to really remember that we know the way forward, the way to prevent things like this happening is never going to be a military way.”

Vardi’s words are powerful, but it is her bold and courageous ministry of presence that makes me ask if I would be willing to choose to be with people who are suffering—even in a military zone.

Is her placing presence over pistols what it looks like to multiply the treasure entrusted to us?

The passage of scripture we heard read today is located toward the end of Matthew’s gospel. This chapter of scripture that is filled with three parables about being ready for Christ’s return is the last thing Matthew places on the ears, minds, and hearts of his readers before writing about the plot to kill Jesus.

Matthew employs language about the kingdom of God more than any other Gospel writer, using the word “kingdom” or “king” 77 times with 71 of these instances used in a theological sense, wants people to understand how followers of Jesus are called to do all they can to bring about a life that is radically different from the accepted norms and power structures of society. Jesus has ushered in what Daniel Erlander describes as “a realm of God’s extravagant grace, mercy, forgiveness, and compassion...a place where those labeled unworthy or impure are received unconditionally...a world of abundant manna shared by all.” And this way of life that benefits all persons, communities, and nations and not just a select few is “worth dropping all other commitments to joyfully receive.”<sup>1</sup>

The realm of God’s extravagant grace, mercy, forgiveness, and compassion is a reality worth dropping all other commitments to joyfully receive.

What have you dropped to joyfully receive and give God’s extravagant grace, mercy, forgiveness, and compassion?

What amount of time or fear have you relinquished only to discover how your investments were like tiny seeds planted in the ground that started to take root and multiply justice in the face of injustice?

What discipleship investments have reaped more dividends than you could have ever dreamt possible?

While I’ve been rather savvy when it comes to investing for my retirement account, I have yet to make a good investment in real estate. I would love to have a do over on the properties I purchased in 2001 and 2005. To say I envy people who bought real estate in 2008 and now have a mortgage less than 3% is an understatement.

But I cannot recall a single time when I sought to make an investment in the name of Jesus that I now regret. In fact, the moments that have felt the riskiest are often the ones that provoke the most joy and gratitude as I now look back on them—from spending time with a former member of our church who lives with significant mental health challenges and who taught me lessons no other church member will come close to teaching me, to speaking out against our denomination’s official teaching on human sexuality before saying I feel called to

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Erlander, *Manna and Mercy*, 45.

provide the same level of pastoral care to every member of our church even if it means risking my ordination.

There are other occasions when all I dropped was inconvenience and time only to discover that I was privy to privileges for which no one is truly worthy from sitting in an emergency room with a mother who was afraid to go home because she had witnessed her adult son jump to his death earlier in the day to walking with a family whose then two-year-old died tragically one year ago tomorrow.

Thankfully God's capacity to multiply does not depend on me choosing the investment but rather on my willingness to show up and make myself available to God and my neighbors.

In our passage today, three people who regularly functioned as accountants for their masters are given talents according to their ability. A talent is not a particular gift or skill. Rather, a talent is the equivalent of a huge bucket of gold—an amount of money that would be worth “about fifteen years’ wages for a typical worker.”<sup>2</sup> Two of the workers take the money and double it like lucky players at a poker table. They are later commended for their work and labeled trustworthy, a word that can also mean “faithful,” before welcoming them into the joy of the master. The third accountant is afraid of the master, hides the gift in the ground, and ends up with exactly what he perceived to have—nothing.

The response this final worker receives from his master is severe. But Thomas Long explains how, “In theological terms, he gets the peevish little tyrant god he believes in. The story is not about a generous master suddenly turning cruel and punitive; it is about living with the consequences of one’s own faith. If one trusts the goodness of God, one can boldly venture out with eyes wide open to the grace in life and can discover the joy of God’s providence everywhere.”<sup>3</sup>

What do your actions, the ways you live, love, speak, and act reveal about what you say to be true about God?

Do you boldly venture out with eyes, hands, and hearts wide open as you respond to the priceless gift of the gospel God has given to us to share with others?

Or have you chosen to believe in a relatively small god who has seemingly not done much since the Bible was written nearly 2000 years ago?

Do we understand the extraordinary value of the gifts God has bestowed upon us—gifts of love, grace, mercy, justice, and compassion—gifts that when shared in a needy world, multiply?

Or are we risk adverse since you never really know what might happen if you forgive the seemingly unforgiveable, welcome the outcast, seek justice in a world of injustice, and speak truth in a cacophony of lies?

Do we let go of our time and resources when we are aware of how much these costly gifts could bless another person, another community, or an entire group of victims of injustice? Or do we grip them in a way that is closely akin to our burying them since we cannot point to any real fruit that is the result of how we have sought to follow Jesus?

My professor of preaching Richard Lischer notes how “The parable suggests a reckoning larger than an assessment of an individual’s abilities or annual pledge. The true reckoning awaits

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Long, *Matthew, Westminster Bible Companion* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 281.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Long, 283.

the entire community, whose faithfulness in ministry is judged every day, and one day will be judged definitively. After that it will be 'too late.'"<sup>4</sup>

Beloveds, I started this sermon series by sharing how we are in the middle of the largest and fastest religious shift in the history of our country. People are leaving church in droves. But what if this time is also one of the most exciting times for the church as we ask why role fear plays in the decisions we make?

What God-size risks are we being called to take?

Where are we playing it safe in ways that benefit no one instead of letting go in ways that could benefit more people than we can currently imagine?

What would it take for us to become a church the world would take seriously?

Are you willing to commit or recommit yourself to Jesus today?

Are you willing to offer yourself to God in a way that reveals how you want God to use you in ways that make a significant impact on the lives of others?

Are you willing to say, "Take my life, Lord," and do with it as you will?

You are invited to actively respond to these questions by coming forward as we together sing. Grace and I have oil and are prepared to anoint you with oil and pray for you to be strengthened and encouraged to use the gifts God has given to you to bring about God's realm on this earth as it is in heaven.

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Lischer, *Interpretation: Reading the Parables* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014), 92.