

Under the Mattress

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.’”

If you go to the beach, chances are, you take a few things with you. A blanket to lay on, a towel, sunscreen... maybe a book, your wallet, a cell phone. No one’s going to steal your towel, but you might be worried about leaving your cell phone unattended while you go into the surf. But this morning, I’m going to let you know the best way to make sure your things stay safe. Simply turn to the folks on the blanket next to you, and ask them to keep an eye on your stuff.

Studies show that simply asking someone, even a complete stranger, to watch your stuff is enough to make them actually care. If you don’t ask your neighbor to watch your phone, they most often will watch someone approach your blanket and walk away with your stuff. They won’t say a single word. But if you ask them, it empowers them. They will approach the would-be thief asking questions and insisting that they leave your things alone. For those few moments while you’re jumping in the waves, they are acting as stewards of your resources.

And that’s what’s going on in Jesus’ parable this morning. His story doesn’t happen at the beach, but he does tell about a wealthy man who is going on vacation. Before he leaves, he

tells his slaves to invest his money for him while he's gone – in essence, to watch his cell phone while he's going for a swim. But the wealthy man is a bit more specific. He talks to three of his slaves. He asks the first slave to invest 10 talents. The second slave is instructed to invest two talents. The third slave is given one talent to invest. Then the master leaves.

When he returns, he checks up with his slaves to see how their investments have done. The first and second slave are both able to report that they have had a 100% return. If I were the wealthy man, I'd be pleased with far less. But it turns out the wealthy man isn't really as interested in the rate of return as he is with the fact that the slaves followed his instructions. Because the third slave did not invest the talent he was given. To be fair, he did what he thought was best. He did the one thing he could do to make sure that he didn't lose any of the money. Given the current volatility in our own stock market, having a zero-gain but zero-loss investment would make many of us happy. The wealthy man, however, is furious! Because he was not interested in the actual return on the investment. He was more interested in what his slaves did.

You see, this story isn't about the money. It's not about investing cash for a financial reward. When the wealthy man gave his money to his slaves, he was actually investing in them as people. He was giving them the opportunity to prove themselves. To do something they could feel good about. To give them a chance to be successful. To learn a skill that would help them personally. So from his perspective, this isn't a story about money. It's a story about investing social resources in order to uplift other people. And that sounds like the Jesus we know. Someone who is interested in money not for money's sake, but as a tool to help improve people's lives.

Jesus is a masterful storyteller. It's a pretty simple story, but there are lots of individual lessons packed into a short space. The first thing we learn is that everyone has something.

There's a world of difference between having one talent and having 10. If that third slave had invested his money and gotten the same return as the others, he'd still only have a fraction of what the first slave started with. The truth is, not everyone in the world has the same resources – and I'm not just talking about money. Some places in the world have more reliable access to electricity or internet. Some places have a more corrupt legal system. Some places have more valuable natural resources. But the landowner has the same expectations, regardless of whether the slave has 10 or two or only one talent. And the expectation is that we will invest.

Sometimes the best way to invest in someone's life isn't with money, but with time. Or love. Or medical treatment. One of the ways we contribute to the world and invest in people is by using our spiritual gifts. And the Scriptures remind us that each of us is given gifts from the Holy Spirit – but that each of us are given different gifts. Paul explains it, saying, “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.” Which points directly to the second lesson, which is that whatever it is you have, it's not actually yours.

There's a great story about a group of researchers who have finally unlocked all the secrets of the universe. They can create life. I'm not talking about cloning or bacteria in a test tube. They can legitimately create life from nothing. So they challenge God, saying that people don't really have a need for him anymore. God shows up for their challenge, saying that he is still the only one who can create life. God goes first, reaching down to take a handful of dirt. He adds some water, molds it into human form, and breathes life into the new person. The scientists smile politely, but say they can do the same thing. One of them reaches down to get a handful of dirt, but God interrupts. “Wait a minute. You have to make your own dirt!”

No matter what we make or what we do, God is at the core of the building blocks of the world. We owe everything we have and everything we are to him. And so we are caretakers of God's creation. Because we are caretakers and not owners, we have to take our instructions from the creator. And it's pretty clear from this parable what God is asking us to do with the resources he has entrusted to us – invest them! You may have spiritual gifts, or financial gifts, or emotional gifts, or physical gifts. Whatever it is that you have, God has instructed you to invest it for the well-being of the world.

The next, and perhaps best lesson of the story is that no one who invests for God loses! Can you imagine if no one's investments had taken a hit in the last few years? I used to be frustrated with this parable. I wanted to have a fourth slave in the story – one who invested all he was given, but realized a loss instead of a gain. Where does loss rank next to not even trying? But more recently I've realized that Jesus didn't have a fourth slave in his story for a reason. When we invest in the stock market, we will eventually realize some losses. It's the nature of the game. But when we invest in people, when we invest in the kingdom of God, we cannot lose.

Remember the movie *Back to the Future*? In the second movie, when Marty McFly goes into his own future, he finds a book with all the sports scores from the last 50 years. He takes the book with him back to his present – knowing that he can't lose when making bets on the outcome of any game, any sport. It may not always feel that certain when we invest with God, but we do not lose. We are investing what God has given us in people God has created according to God's instructions. The results may not be what we expect, but there will be goodness in it.

The results may not be what we expect. That's the nature of investing, right? It calls for speculating about what may or may not happen. If I invest in this person, will he live up to his potential? If I sponsor this student, will she complete her studies and go on to make the world a

better place? We like to have some kind of risk analysis before we invest. We want to retain some kind of control.

When we invest in God, we give up that control. We leave it up to God to make the biggest difference in the world. But in exchange, God has promised that all our investments will realize gain. Because even if that student squanders her scholarship and drops out of school, you will have strengthened your relationship with God through the very act of giving. When we give, when we invest, we realize a gain immediately – in our relationship with God. And often, our investment goes further and creates financial, social or spiritual gains in someone else.

It's not unusual for those kinds of gains to take time – which means we may not be around to see the results of our investing. When we invest in God, we also place our trust in God. But we also have assurances from God. In our parable this morning, everyone who invests receives a 100% return. In Jeremiah we read, “‘For surely I know the plans I have for you,’ says the Lord, ‘plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.’”

As people of faith, we believe that even when we are not in control, that God is. That when we can't see the future, God can. You do not have to invest your money in anything. You can keep it under the mattress and hope for the best. But is that really what you want to be doing? When it comes to your time, you don't have a choice. We can't stockpile time in a safe place – we have no choice but to spend it, every day. Whether you use it wisely or squander it, you will spend 24 hours every day. You will be investing in something – maybe others, maybe yourself. God has given you the resources you need, and he has asked you to invest it for the good of the world. Will you? Amen and amen.