

Glen Ridge Congregational Church
 November 13, 2011; Matthew 25:14-30 –proper 28A
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Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

It's always a bit of a challenge to preach about a parable like this one because we know the story so very well: like the stories of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son, we know this one too of the three servants entrusted with the talents by their master.

This is a story about inequities. Some got much more than others, and while that strikes us as being unfair, it is certainly not contrary to the way of the world. While none of us would like to think we've been given too much or that we've received so generously without merit, we also realize that the gifts of life are not spread about equally. Some indeed have more than we do; others have even far less. That's the way it is – it's real, isn't it. One servant received 10 talents, one five, the last just one. There are inequities.

We know it's a story about abundance. The last servant had control over only one bag – but it was full. A talent, according to one commentator, would be equivalent to roughly 15 years of wages for a person engaged in hard labor – now, that's a lot of value, even if it is only one. There is abundance.

We know it's a story about blessings – not only money. While a talent was originally a measure of financial value, it has come to mean any of a variety of abilities and skills that we might have learned or come by naturally – so the talents of this story have long been understood to be more than a financial measure only. It's about anything we might do. There are blessings.

We know it's a story about stewardship – the parable doesn't stop after relating what has been given to each servant. There is great interest in what each man does with what's been entrusted to him. Two of them do very well and make handsome returns. But the third simply holds onto his resource. Quite a contrast there. Not only the amount of what the servants have, but also what they do with it all is of great interest to the storyteller and the listener. Stewardship.

And finally, we know it's a story about judgment. What we do matters. The closing verses of the parable remind us of this lesson which is also true in our own lives. The master returns and evaluates what his servants have done – he rewards the two who have served him well and punishes the servant who has not. Gifts and opportunities call for action, and there are consequences of those actions. There is judgment.

In the sermons you've heard on this parable, you recognize the familiar themes, don't you. There's nothing new so far – but there's nothing wrong with going over familiar lessons as a review – often we hear them in a new way. Maybe the threads that run through this parable are worth another look, especially the way they run together.

Take the themes of abundance, stewardship, and judgment: maybe there's a warning here that's especially appropriate 11 days before Thanksgiving.

Let's think about if there's a difference between counting our blessings and being thankful. Do you suppose that God is satisfied in simply hearing that we like what we have, that we do remember who gave us these things? Maybe God would rather hear just what we have done with what we have – though the parable teaches us in fact that God demands to hear. The judgment of the parable in which the talents of the third servant are taken from him in light of his inactivity might serve as that Thanksgiving warning for all of us. If we are indeed thankful for what God has done for us, we will show our thanks through our actions and not just our prayers. Living in an attitude of gratitude means we are led to action, to sharing. Yes, some of the threads in this parable are timely, aren't they.

How about the threads of abundance and inequity? We all recognize the inequities of life, but too often we're aware of how much more others have than we recognize how much less so many people have. Globally speaking, there is not one person here today who would not be considered in the "haves" of this world – so any sense that we are "have nots" is a dangerous illusion. In a world of striking inequities, we have such an abundance of gold, talents, and blessings of every material category. If we aspire for more, we'd best remember how greater capacities demand of us greater responsibilities. The parable is a hard pronouncement, and we just can't pretend that we would be faithful with more without asking how faithful we have been with what has already been placed into our care. The greater the level of our wealth and abilities, the heavier the burden of our responsibility, our accountability.

Let's look at this parable for a minute with its thread of judgment against the parables of God's grace – we know many of them: a shepherd leaves the flock to hunt for one lost lamb. An owner of a vineyard pays the same wages to those who worked one hour as he pays to those in the fields all day. A father receives his wandering son who returns from a foreign land after squandering his inheritance. We need to read Jesus' parables in balance: grace and judgment – unrestrained love and accountability – neither theme can be rightly understood without a view of the other. Here we have a story of God's judgment in our lives – let's hear it, receive it as we have heard and received the parables of God's limitless love – for it is judgment that interprets grace and grace that interprets judgment. Grace and responsibility are not contradictory but are two sides of the same covenant God has made with us.

But here's the thing: so often we've focused on the third servant – who lost everything, the one who stood pat on the hand he was dealt. What about the first two servants? Do we ever think about the fact that they did not produce their return by not taking some risks with their resources?

What if they'd lost the money that had been given to them? What if in their attempts to double their investments, the financial winds had blown the other way? What if things had gone sour? What if the stock market had tanked, their accountant had embezzled their funds, the bank had gone under? What if?

Almost lost in all the dimensions of this parable is that troubling little question. They took risks – they had to have taken risks to have their investments perform so well – the parable ends happily for them. But, what if?

And isn't that a question we ask ourselves so often!

My 25 years at the bank in the Trust Division, then Investment Services, seem like a lifetime ago. We didn't have the same sophisticated investment vehicles then.

Investment decisions were made by people, not so much by computer formula. Daily volumes were tiny compared to today's numbers – and that's a good thing because our processing of trades was manual, not automated. We even held the majority of stock certificates for our accounts in our vault – settlement of trades was a manual process. A lifetime ago indeed.

But what ruled much of the decision making, especially for personal trust accounts, was the “Prudent Investor Rule” – while the account managers looked for gain, at least not loss, for their accounts, their mission was more to “preserve wealth”. Doesn't that sound like an old fashioned goal! And who does that remind you of in this story? Of course – the third servant. High risk was something to be avoided – at least for many of our accounts. There's something to be said for that in this situation but I'm not sure that's the most important message we take away from this parable.

Maybe what we're learning about here is a new definition of the prudent investor rule – if we are truly investing the blessings, the abundance God has bestowed upon us, risk becomes critical to our discipleship.

And I'm thinking of all the risks that the Christian life of discipleship requires from all of us.

Forgiving and seeking forgiveness though we fear it might put us at a disadvantage in a relationship.

Inviting someone to open their life to the living Christ even though you might be ridiculed. Inviting someone to worship here or to one of our educational events or to the Advent Workshop or to anything else because you have found a fullness of life, a new meaning to life here in this community that you want to share. These invitations aren't always easy to make, are they.

Our life of discipleship includes trusting someone in spite of the chance they might not come through.

Loving someone unconditionally.

Reaching out to the stranger in our midst. Treating everyone we meet with dignity and respect – after all, we are all created in God's image. All of us.

Disagreeing with someone but not being disagreeable.

Speaking out against injustice – including those times when we witness someone bullying another person.

Acting against injustice, oppression: maybe giving up a couple of those expensive exotic coffee drinks and using those resources to buy peanut butter and jelly for a hungry child served by our local food pantry. Maybe writing letters to our senators, our congressional delegation insisting that the ones most poverty stricken no longer suffer in the midst of such great abundance.

Can we think of a single calling we have as Christian disciples that can be accomplished without risk? Loving. Caring. Forgiving. Peacemaking. Evangelizing. Giving. Trusting. Witnessing. Hoping? All of these are risky behaviors at times, aren't they.

Perhaps more than any other act, as Christians attempting to live out our faith, we are called to take risks and respond like those first two servants. I believe we are called into a battle, if you will, whose outcome is sure but which is always a dangerous venture in the moment. We are called to love where there is not love. We are called to forgive where there is only festering resentment. We are called to trust where there is

only suspicion. We are called to hope when the clouds are the darkest. And we are called to risk whatever the odds.

The last servant could not bring himself to take the risk. Didn't he care? Didn't he want to serve well? Of course he did. His stumbling block was not the lack of good intentions. It was fear.

He answered the master, "I knew you were a hard man."

He was afraid of failure. He was afraid of the what ifs.

Putting nothing into his investment, he got nothing back, and in the end, lost it all. He buries what he has and ends up gaining nothing.

I believe the same is true of our faith. Why didn't the servant take the risk? Because he was afraid. It is, after all, fear that is the opposite of faith, not doubt.

The parable of the talents is not a lesson about our degree of ability or productivity – it is a lesson about our attitude and responsibility – about stepping out with God's treasure in our hands and risking it all for the sake of others – for the sake of God.

We get afraid too, don't we. Those "what ifs" are always part of our lives. This is an age of great fear, great anxiety – it seems to me that it's a human condition to be afraid. And maybe that's where being part of a church community can help. When our faith is tested, challenged, we need each other. And when our faith is sustaining us, giving us such joy, we need each other too. We need to come together, care for each other, support each other, challenge each other, love each other.

We're all on this journey together. And there's some wonderfully good news in this: God keeps trying to pull us along – God hasn't and won't give up on us. God is calling us to be open, to be willing to risk, to be willing to change, even maybe to give up what we may have. Can we be willing to look ahead, beyond what's stopping us? Beyond our worry about tomorrow and what it might or might not bring, what risks we'll face?

Someone very wise told me this week, if we put God first we don't have to worry. God's in charge – not us – and isn't a relief! We're never alone on this journey.

Let's take that risk both as individuals and as church to take that giant chance – let's step out in faith, let's each of us turn toward the God who creates us, who cares for us, who loves us, and say, here I am. Send me. Use me. Mold me. Make me your servant. And may we hear loud and clear the promise of the parable: "Enter into the joy of your master." Enter into the joy now and always.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus, you have called us to be your disciples and entrusted to us your realm. Knowing ourselves and our limitations, we are amazed that you have put such great trust in us and in our ability to be faithful to you. Lord, make us more faithful. Renew in each of us the conviction that we are your representatives, your ambassadors in the world, that you strengthen us to do your work near and far. Enable us to so live that others might see the promise and joy of your realm taking form through our lives. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.