

“It Works For Me”

November 16, 2008 – Matthew 25:14-30

INTRO: In today’s reading, we hear Jesus speaking about accountability. This parable builds on last week’s parable—the one about the ten young women and their lamps. Today’s parable asks us to think about how we live our lives—and especially how we use all the gifts that God has given us. Particularly right now, we may not be able to hear this parable without thinking of the stock market. Even though the ancient world didn’t have our complex financial markets, they too knew about investments and profits.

We don’t have to go very far, or go through many hours, to hear somebody talking about investments. Wall Street ended a turbulent week with stocks going down, recovering a bit, and going back down again. The economic news is sobering for most of us when we think about money for kids’ college education, money for the mortgage investments for retirement, or if people have already retired, whether they can now afford to remain retired.

I remember a conversation I had with my parents, probably ten years ago, when we were trying to decide whether they should move some money of theirs from a savings account, into mutual funds. I was urging my parents to put that money to work for them, so it would earn more than it did in a simple savings account. I can still remember my mother saying: “That money is in First Federal Savings and Loan, and the president of First Federal was my first-grader, Richard Belcher. I taught him to read. He’s a fine man and I trust him, and have no intention of moving my money.”

She wanted to play it safe and be cautious. Many of us might wish we had a Richard Belcher in our lives, with our money in that savings account, steadily accumulating a little interest, no loss on the principal.

The three servants in today’s story, are needing to decide what to do with the money they’ve been given. All three are given differing amounts, and all three make their own choices. The first two invest their money, and double their returns. The third servant didn’t even take as much risk as my mother was willing to take. He was afraid and digs a hole and hides the money. At that time, the common practice was to bury something to keep it safe, so nobody could steal it. If a person buried something, they were no longer considered liable because they’d taken the safest route possible. The amount of money he buried was roughly equal to a laborer’s wage for 15-20 years—no small sum. And when the Master returns, instead of being pleased that the money is safe, the Master calls the servant lazy and good-for-nothing. In comparison to the other two servants who actually took some risk and did something with their money, the third servant was immobilized by fear. In his eyes, what he did was the least risky things to do.

That third servant isn’t alone in being fearful of taking a risk. Many of us may have had the experience of thinking we were taking just minimal risks with our investments, and we’re wondering now if those were wise choices.

It’s said that one of life’s greatest phobias is the fear of the future. Uncertainty about what might happen, may immobilize us into playing things so safe, that we do nothing.

There was a man named Luigi Tarisio, who started out as a carpenter. He gave up that profession because of his love of violins. When he died, was found to possess 246 violins. They represented a lifetime of collecting. They were found stored everywhere in his house—in the attic, closets, even in dresser drawers. In a dingy attic in Milan, were no fewer than 24 Stradivaris and 120 other Italian masterpieces. “Although he had started life as a penniless carpenter, he died in 1854 worth about £12,000.” (*The New York Times*, 12/30/1895)

But those valuable violins weren’t played—they were simply collected. Think about the music that could have been produced in the world, during all the years those violins were in his keeping. His passionate devotion to his hobby had robbed the world of that music.

I believe God doesn’t want our gifts to be idle and useless, but to be at work for God in our world. We will be judged, not by the amount of gifts we’ve received, but by how well we use the gifts God has given and by our alertness to the opportunities God brings to us every day to use what we have.

“Oseola McCarty lived in Mississippi all her life. As a young girl, she dreamed of becoming a nurse. But her aunt and grandmother became ill when she was a young schoolgirl, and McCarty left school after completing the sixth grade, to care for them. Since her family was made up of washerwomen, Oseola followed in their footsteps. She washed other people’s clothes for over 70 years. Oseola began saving money when she was very young. Her habit of saving and investing a

portion of her earnings continued throughout her life. She measured her spending habits carefully, lived simply, and never wastefully.” (Tiffany Powell)

She never owned a car, walked everywhere she went, pushed a shopping cart nearly a mile to get groceries. In 1947, her uncle gave her the house in which she lived until she died. She also received some money from her aunt and her mother when they died, which she placed into savings. With the assistance of a local attorney and a bank officer, she made plans for the future distribution of her estate. She set aside 10% for her church, 10% for each of three relatives, and the remaining 60% for the University of Southern Mississippi.

“Years ago, African-Americans weren’t allowed to attend this University. Now, with Oseola’s support, specifically African-American students have an opportunity to fulfill their dreams of a college education.” (Tiffany Powell)

The University of Southern Mississippi received \$150,000 at her death. She said “there was nothing in particular she had wanted to buy and no place in particular she wanted to go. She wanted to do something good with the money she had made. Contributions from more than 600 donors have added some \$330,000 to her original amount. After hearing of Oseola’s gift, Ted Turner gave away a billion dollars,” influenced by Oseola’s generosity. (*The New York Times*, 9/28/99)

Oseola’s story reminds us that ordinary people can make some extraordinary choices about how they will use the gifts God gives them. Oseola’s money is at work, long after her life on this earth has ended. I believe our resources work for us, when we take the gifts God entrusts to us, and share them so that the work of God can be done in our world. And I believe those resources are at work for us as we support the church and its ministries, so that we can be the presence of Christ to others.

Anne Lamott says “Giving is the way we can feel abundant. It’s the way we fill ourselves up.” Perhaps at a time, when we are fearful of what our financial futures may look like, we can keep in mind that giving helps us feel abundant—giving whatever we can.

Quaker theologian/philosopher Parker Palmer once told a story about abundance vs. scarcity. Parker was a passenger on a plane that pulled away from the gate, taxied to a remote corner of the field and stopped. The pilot came on the intercom and said, “I have some bad news and some really bad news. The bad news is there’s a storm front in the West, Denver is socked in and shut down. We’ve looked at the alternatives and there are none. So we’ll be staying here for few hours. That’s the bad news. The really bad news is that we have no food and it’s lunch time.” Everybody groaned. Some passengers started to complain, some became angry. But then, Palmer said, one of the flight attendants did something amazing. She stood up and took the intercom mike and said, “We’re really sorry, folks. We didn’t plan it this way and we really can’t do much about it. And I know for some of you this is a big deal. Some of you are really hungry and were looking forward to a nice lunch. Some of you may have a medical condition and really need lunch. Some of you may not care one way or the other and some of you need to skip lunch. So I’ll tell you what we’re going to do. I have a couple of breadbaskets up here and we’re going to pass them around and I’m asking everybody to put something in the basket. Some of you brought a little snack along — something to tide you over — just in case something like this happened, some peanut butter crackers, candy bars. And some of you have a few LifeSavers or chewing gum or Roloids. And if you don’t have anything edible, you have a picture of your children or spouse or girlfriend/boyfriend or a bookmark or a business card. Everybody put something in and then we’ll reverse the process. We’ll pass the baskets around again and everybody can take out what he/she needs. “Well,” Palmer said, “what happened next was amazing. The griping stopped. People started to root around in pockets and handbags, some got up and opened their suitcases stored in the overhead luggage racks and got out boxes of candy, a salami. People were laughing and talking. She had transformed a group of people who were focused on need and deprivation into a community of sharing and celebration. She had transformed scarcity into a kind of abundance.” (John Buchanan)

I believe God gives to us abundantly, and on this day we are urged to reflect on God’s amazing investment in us and to not let our fears take over. And to see that all with which we have been entrusted—our talents, money, all the resources at our disposal, are to be at work for us, and for God. In our community, our place of work, our family life, the church, let us be known, not as the people who are cautious or safe or keep our gifts to ourselves, but who are willing to take some risks and invest ourselves, living fully the life God entrusts to us. --Sue Burwell