

**“The Case Against Playing It Safe” (1)**  
**Text: Psalm 63:1-8; Matthew 25:14-30**  
**The Reverend Joanna M. Adams**  
**Morningside Presbyterian Church**  
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*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. Matthew 25:29*

The ice is thin beneath me this morning. First of all, this Matthew text seems to imply that engaging in high risk financial figures is the right thing to do. On the other hand, the text seems to be saying that if you put your money under the mattress or in a hole in the backyard, you will soon be gnashing your teeth. Yet, in our present economic environment, it appears that the opposite is the case. Those who have not taken risks are likely to have at least what they started with, while those who have invested significant amounts in the stock market are doing more than their fair share of weeping and teeth gnashing these days.

These are the reasons why, when I sat down last week to work on the parable of the talents, I said to myself, “Oh, no!” The title and the text had already been published; otherwise I might be tempted to preach on the power of prayer or the woman at the well. I was stuck. I thought about calling in some experts from the Morningside Economics Department, but then I realized we didn’t have one of those. I concluded that we would simply have to press on with this often misunderstood parable, which is both about money, and not about money. (2) We press on because there might be some genuine good news for us in the parable, some wise words that might guide us through this time of global economic crisis, not to mention personal economic crisis.

I have to admit I have not much experience in practicing ministry in the midst of a monetary meltdown, but it’s not rocket science to realize that it’s hard for all of us to keep our balance and not to get anxious, when it feels as if the rug is being pulled out from under us. I have taken comfort in recent weeks in reading the Psalms, and I recommend that you consider doing the same. Try Psalm 37: “Fret not yourself for the cause of the wicked, for they will soon fade like grass. Trust the Lord; do good. And you will dwell in the land and enjoy security.” Then, this beautiful Psalm we read today: “Lord, you have been my help and in the shadow of your wings, I sing for joy. My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.” How about: “God is our refuge and strength and ever present help in time of trouble.... The Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob our refuge.”?

In times of uncertainty, I need comfort and reassurance, the kind only my faith tradition can give me. But comfort and assurance are not all I need. I might also need a kick in the pants, which is exactly what Jesus was giving to his followers when he told them the Parable of the Talents. The parable itself is catalogued as a tragic parable, in that the plot moves downward, like the Dow Jones average here lately. The plot turns downward toward catastrophe. (3)

There are, of course, parables that do just the opposite. One of my favorites is the one about the kingdom of God, which is like a mustard seed. When it is sown, it is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Then it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs and puts forth large branches so that the birds of the air make nests in its shade. (Mark 4:30-32) Or, the parable of the lost sheep - Jesus asks which one of you, having gotten 99 sheep into the fold, would not go out leaving the 99, and search for the one who is lost, and when that lost sheep is found, the shepherd lays it on his shoulders and brings it home and rejoices. There are happy, joyful parables, as well as sad ones.

The parable of the talents could legitimately be called a mixture of both comic and tragic, since things turn out really well for two of the three servants, who were put to the test by their master.

What happens is that a landowner who is going to be away for a long time, gives three of his servants different sums of money, each according to his ability. A talent, by the way, was a huge sum of money. Though difficult to determine its exact worth in today's dollars, it was a unit of monetary measure. The fellow given five talents traded with them and made five more. The one given two also doubled his resources, but the one who had been given one talent took it and buried in the ground, and when the master returned there was a reckoning. The two who had done something with what they have been given were commended and given even greater responsibilities. The one who was burdened with an excess of caution and a glaring absence of judgment began his conversation with his master by blaming the master, saying it was his fault that the servant had failed. "I know what kind of man you are, how harsh you can be, and how you like to reap the harvest of other people's labors. I was so afraid that I went and hid the talent you gave me in the ground. But I did dig it up, and here it is."

The master is fit to be tied. "Even if what you say about me is true," implying that it isn't true, "you could have invested my money in a bank," (Well, that was then, and this is now.) "and earned some interest, but you didn't."

Then he turns to someone and says, "Take his money from him. Give it the one who has ten. And as for this worthless servant, throw him into outer darkness."

Traditionally, the parable has been heard as an allegory - a word of caution to the early church. Jesus was seen as the landowner; the disciples were the servants.

The talents represented the gift of Christ's mission. The time of waiting, while the landowner is away, is understood to be that period between Jesus' resurrection and ascension and before his return to complete the eschatological age. The message to the church was that while you are waiting for the Lord's return, don't put his light under a bushel; take risks. Put the lamp on the lamp stand; let it give light to all in the house. (Matt.5:15) Don't be timid, afraid to give all you have, even your life, for the sake of Christ and his mission. In the end, those who have taken risks for the Lord's sake will be rewarded, and those who have failed to trust that the future is in God's hands will not be rewarded. They will end up in a place far away from the love and grace of God. As harsh as that sounds, you've got to remember that the one talent man was entirely in charge of his fate. In seeing himself as a victim, ("Oh that mean master's going to be mad at me if I fail".) he became a victim. What he was afraid of actually came to pass, and would not have come to pass, had he not been afraid. When the sad saga began, he had been a free moral agent. He was the one who decided to understand the world the way he did and to act on that worldview. (4)

If you want to think about his fate in non-theological terms, you could just say it this way, clearly and simply - One cannot live one's life based on fear and dread and expect anything other than to lose the joy and wonder of living. When your main concern is whether you yourself will be all right, then, you too are skating on thin ice. You might be breathing in and out, but you have for all practical purposes ceased to live. In any circumstance, a person chooses whether he or she is going to live hopelessly and joylessly, or to live a life that is rich in joy and love. You remember Paul's writing from prison - "I have learned in every circumstance to be content. (Philippians 4:10-13.) It was nice of you to send me presents, but I have learned what it is to have plenty, and I have learned that God can be trusted in both circumstances."

Fear is what keeps us from fulfilling our own possibilities and doing what God put us on the earth to do. I was trying to think of a way to help you and me both dig into these challenging ideas that come from the wisdom of Jesus, and I thought about our now seven-year-old granddaughter, Virginia, and how for years, when we would go to the pool, during our week at the beach, Virginia would stay at the shallow end. She would play on the steps or hang on to the side of the pool. When encouraged to get out there and play with the others, she would always explain that she didn't like to have water in her eyes. But then, last spring, a miraculous breakthrough in the form of a great swimming teacher at the "Y" Enrichment, who somehow got Virginia away from the steps and out of the shallow end and into the wonder and glory of the deep end. The water- in- the- eyes problem was solved with a pair of beautiful pink goggles, and now Virginia swims like a fish - more under the water than above it. Her worldview has changed, and her actions have changed. Faith or fear - that is the choice.

I am often drawn to the brilliant words of Harry Emerson Fosdick, one of the great preachers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. "Fear imprisons; faith liberates. Fear

paralyzes; faith empowers. Fear sickens; faith heals. Fear makes useless; faith makes serviceable; and most of all, fear puts hopelessness at the heart of life, while faith puts joy at the heart of life.”

Someone recently gave me a book of essays entitled *This I Believe*. They are essays first heard on NPR, as well as some from other outstanding individuals of recent years. Helen Keller, one of my heroes, has said, “Active faith knows no fear. It is a safeguard for me against cynicism and despair. Faith is a state of mind, the believer is not soon disheartened. If the believer is turned out of his shelter, he builds a house that the winds of earth can never destroy. No more do I live in fear, like the deaf, dumb and blind girl I once was. I am convinced that humankind is growing out of ignorance in to the light of a brighter day.” (5)

We will have a brighter day in the United States of America if there are people who, like Helen Keller, understand that God is moving us toward the light. We followers of Christ are people who bear witness to the light, rather than doom and gloom. That one talent man, he was not a bad or evil person. He didn't lie or steal or kill anybody, did he? His mistake was to live life by the wrong credo. His credo was – what do you think? – I'd suggest, *hold on to what you've got*. Whenever concern for self-preservation trumps trust, you're done for. But to act in faith in spite of fear - you can't help being afraid, but you can move through it - that's the secret to life.

There are few things in my life that have been as inspirational to me as these past four years serving as your pastor. You could have said, “We'll make do with what we have. We'll stay here at the shallow end of the pool, holding onto the sides, playing it safe.” But you didn't. Exercising the free will God gave you, you've chosen to create a future different from the past. What harvests will be reaped when all people, regardless of physical condition, will be able to participate in all aspects of our congregational life! You decided there was no time like the present to take action, and so you did. You first called Melinda Sandkam, our outstanding Program Director, who now is able to work here full-time doing two or three jobs at once, by the way. You called one-half of Chris Henry, hoping and trusting that we could afford to have the whole Chris Henry in 2009, as our full-time Associate Pastor. We've taken every little bit we have and invested it in the future. And because we had the faith to do that, the future we have dreamed about, the future God wants to give us, is coming to be.

What is the Christian response to these current conditions out there in the world with so many unknowns ahead? What should we be thinking about and praying about and doing? We should first be praising God, who has done wonderful things, plans formed of old. We should not be foolish, but by golly, we should be confident, that God will, as the Psalmist says in the King James Version – “God will help us right early.” The worst thing we could do would be to hold back, to change course, to throw a pity party. Now is the time to make the best use of

what the Lord has given us. The Lord has given us enough, to do what needs to be done.

In the book *This I Believe* novelist Isabel Allende writes her philosophy of life. She describes in a very poignant way the death of her daughter Paula, who had fallen into a coma and stayed in a coma for a year, until she died. She said that year taught her “that all you really have is what you give. It is by spending yourself that you become rich. What’s the point in having a talent if I don’t give it away? Or of having wealth, if I don’t share it? For it is in giving that I connect with other people, and with the world, and with the Divine.”

I had a friend in Chicago, a great gal, named Sue Duffy. She had been a Girl Scout executive until MS - multiple sclerosis - struck. When I met her, the disease really had her pressed to the mat. She could hardly move anything except a couple of fingers on one hand, by which she steered her wheelchair using a gizmo that responded to touch. Her neck was supported by a brace. It was the whole nine yards with Sue, in terms of bad stuff. But for the entire time I was in Chicago at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Sue Duffy chaired the Evangelism committee. Under her leadership, the church grew like crazy. Sue made it a point to meet every new member. She’d say “I’ll be sitting at the end of the aisle, third row back, north end of the sanctuary. Come see me. I’ll always be there waiting for you. We will be friends.” I’ve never known a person who took every little bit of the little bit she had left, and spent it so extravagantly. She could have buried herself and her remarkable human spirit in bed and never gotten up again. But she didn’t. She didn’t until the day she died.

And so it came to pass that the landowner decided to go away on a long journey. Before he left, he assembled his servants. And to one, he gave five talents, to another he gave two, and to another he gave one, each according to his or her ability. He does that with each of us too. So, you gifted ones out there, what will you have to show for your life when he returns? (7) In good times and the tough times, may our faith rejoice in the goodness of our God. May believers never be disheartened, for it is in times of great testing that we can become our very best selves.

(1) Jon Walton used this title for a sermon he preached at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Wilmington, Delaware, 11/17/96.

(2) Ibid.

(3) Dan Otto Via, Jr. *The Parables*, Fortress Press, 1967, p.113-122.

(4) Ibid.

(5) Helen Keller, “The Light of a Brighter Day,” *This I Believe*, Holt paperbacks, 2007, p.138-140.

(6) Isabel Allende, “In Giving I Connect With Others,” *This I Believe*, p.13-15.

(7) Walton.

