

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

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In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Well today's Gospel lesson from Matthew is timely – it is about money, investment and risk! The ancient world in Jesus' day did not have complex financial instruments like mortgage-backed securities and credit default swaps, but it knew about trading, investments and profit! Jesus' parables came out of the world his listeners lived in. I can imagine the interest of the disciples as Jesus starts talking about money. They probably suddenly got real attentive – like in that old E.F. Hutton TV ad (remember them?).

The format of the story – a rich man going away and entrusting his property to his slaves – would be familiar. The listeners would know that this is about a test and who will pass. The master going away entrusted his property to his slave according to their abilities. To the first he gave five talents, to the second he gave two talents and to the third only one talent. Now the disciples must really be listening. Jesus isn't just talking about money; he's talking about **big money** – hedge fund size money.

The first two take the money and start trading with it. The third, who got only one talent, buries the silver talent in the ground. Now you should know that in those days there weren't any T-bills, so a lot of people buried their money to keep it safe and under the law at that time the slave absolved himself of any responsibility by burying it.

When the master returns the audience anticipates the accounting. The first two doubled the master's money – a 100% return on what was already an unimaginable amount of money. The master praises them, saying that being entrusted with a few things, they will now be entrusted with many things. Enter into your master's joy. What was the audience thinking now? I wondered just how rich is this guy anyway? I mean he thinks eight talents of silver is “walk around money”? Next, I wondered what kind of leverage did the first two slaves use or what kind of crazy risks did they take to get that rate of return?

The third slave, the one who buried his talent, told the master that he knew the master was a harsh man “reaping where he did not sow” – sort of like today's corporate raiders – so he buried the talent. He returned the talent saying – here you have what is yours. The master berates him, gives the one talent he had to the one who now has ten. Throwing the slave out into the outer darkness the master notes: “For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.”

Jesus' listeners would have been astounded? They knew about absentee landlords. Their sympathy would be with the poor mistreated slave who was thrown out into the cold.

This parable is the second of three that Matthew uses to illustrate what the followers of the Way of Jesus should be doing while waiting for his return. Now the story is not really about money. The talents are the Spirit of God, the life force and fire that God gives us. The story is about putting them to work in the world to bring God's kingdom closer. The slave who buried the talent given him by the master was thinking not about his master's interests but, rather, his own.

There is both a challenge and a sting in this parable. The challenge is to take risks and put God's spirit to work in the world. Taking risk is related to trust. The first two trusted in God's Spirit; the third named his fear – he did not trust the master and so he buried the Spirit to keep it safe. Matthew's community of largely Jewish followers of Jesus' way might have been thinking of the major controversy they were having with the rabbinic Pharisees who wanted to put a fence around the Torah to keep it safe and pure from the Gentile outsiders. Many Gentiles were becoming followers of Jesus and joining Matthew's community; there were probably not a few in Matthew's community who thought that the doors should not be thrown open so recklessly.

This parable as told by Matthew challenges us to trust when God wants to distribute his gifts of Spirit and love as God sees fit. It challenges us to let God's Spirit given to us flow through us to where it will go. It is God who is property it is and it is God doing the investing through us.

I read recently a quote that I thought relevant to today's Gospel lesson. It goes "the tragedy today is that so many people are afraid of losing or endangering God that they seek to stop God's adventurous investing. They seek to stop inclusion that they fear may compromise God's purity and holiness."

Today's parable still challenges us in our churches. It challenges us to not turn our churches into religious bank vaults but to keep our doors open. Some of you may have read that the Diocese of Ft. Worth, Texas, has at their convention this weekend voted to follow San Joaquin, Pittsburgh, and Quincy in "leaving the Episcopal Church". The truth is that Dioceses are creations of the national church and are not

going anywhere. People leave the Episcopal Church, even bishops, but dioceses remain in the Church that created them.

I remember the time of the ordination of the first women in the Church. I, myself, had questions about such a change in tradition. I can appreciate that some who are leaving have serious concerns about Scripture and moral theology. Some just don't want big changes. Some feel that by having someone they consider sinners or "less than" somehow compromises and lessens God. As a seminary teacher once noted, "Protecting God is another variant of not trusting God." The best advice I got during the early controversy over women's ordination was that "God is a big boy; God created and sustains everything. If this is not a good idea it will be recognized as a mistake and disappear. If it thrives it may well be the Spirit moving. Either way God will still be God."

This parable also challenges us in our common civic life. The Gospel is about life and living not about church. Jesus spent most of his time out in the real world with ordinary people – all sorts of people. For a while now, much of our civic and political discourse has been to appeal to people's fears. Boogey men are created and fear is amplified. Recently I saw an interview of Gen. Colin Powell on TV. He was asked about TV ads that raised fears that a Muslim might be made President of the United States. General Powell first dealt with the facts, namely, that was currently no Muslim candidate running for that office. But then he did something I don't think either of the two candidates or any other politician would do. He went to the heart of that fear and exposed it for what it was. "So what," he said, "if a Muslim is President!" "What's wrong," he asked, "with some Muslim kid now growing up in

Dearborn, Michigan or Princeton, NJ dreaming of someday becoming President of the United States?”

Now **that** is trust! That is taking the Gospel out into the world and letting the Spirit of the Living God flow through you to be invested as God sees fit! In the parable in Matthew’s Gospel, it is the fearful that are rejected because they are consumed by their own concerns, not God’s.

By the way, Colin Powell is a life-long Episcopalian who intends to remain one.

Amen.