

## **Time Capsules: The Stewardship of Risk**

*Matthew 25:14-30*

Preached by Michael G. Isaacs

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Grace and peace to you and greetings from Westminster Presbyterian Church. One of the greatest joys of worshipping at 4:00 P.M. is being able to worship with other congregations in the area.

It was such an honor to be asked by your pastor, Keith, to preach here today, and then he told me that he was doing a series on Stewardship during October. And, all of a sudden, it felt like less of an honor.

If anyone knows anything about the congregation that I serve, you might know that when they called me, we had a \$60,000 deficit. After forty years of declining membership, about thirty members of Westminster decided to “go all in” and call a full-time pastor for the first time in twenty years. They did not want their resources to simply dwindle. Rather they wanted to use them for ministry, even if it meant closing sooner than they would like. Their hope, though, was that this would revitalize their congregation.

We are closing two weeks from today. Yet, I think we were faithful stewards. One of the stories Jesus told in Matthew has been really helpful for us in our practice of stewardship.

Listen now for the Word of God.

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."

In 2011, the Asheville Citizen-Times reported about the contents of a time capsule in the old Terrace Theater behind Innsbruck Mall on Tunnel Road.<sup>i</sup>

The capsule was buried in 1967; it was intended to be opened in 2067. Since the building was being torn down, it was as good a time as any to open it.

The contents were mostly indigenous to Asheville in 1967:

- a thermometer from Taylor Instruments in Arden
- nylon and polyester from American Enka
- a plastic flower and candle from Esta's Flower
- Geber apple juice and a Ball jar
- a small electric motor from Kearfott in Swannanoa
- a Southern Bell phone directory and a Citizen Times newspaper
- There was even a hand grenade from Northrop Carolina, Inc. – fortunately dismantled.

Those who were hoping for some lucrative treasure were disappointed.

There were no large sums of money in the capsule.

However, there was a one-dollar bill from 1963.

Accounting for inflation, a 1963 is worth today....any guesses? Fourteen cents.

They should have spent that dollar when they had a chance!

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Can you imagine if someone had given the master in today's parable a dollar that had devalued 86%?

When the master—or, literally in Greek, the Lord—went away, he split up his money among his servants.

One of them received five talents. One received three. And another received one. Each according to their ability.

The first two doubled their master's money: "Well done, good and faithful servant."

The third one buried it for safekeeping.

He gave it back to his master upon his return.

If he had placed in the time capsule at Innsbruck Mall—he would have given back fourteen cents on the dollar!

Likewise, burying the gift of the master could have devalued it.

"Oh," the master says, "you are an evil and lazy servant."

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This parable poses a question to us: What do we do while we wait for the return of our Lord? Jesus was preparing his disciples for his departure when he told this story. He was preparing for death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven. What would Jesus' disciples do as they wait for the Jesus to return? Jesus told them to continue his ministry. He told them to continue to heal the sick, feed the hungry, visit the prisoner. He told them to continue to be salt and light in the world.

Continue investing yourself in the world as God has invested in you.

Oddly, we are still waiting for the Lord to return. The Church is still continuing the ministry of Jesus Christ. We are the ones who have been given much. What do we do with it?

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Sometimes, I wish Jesus had told this parable a little differently. It is good to know that at least one of the servants doubled their investment.

But what if the second hadn't? What if the second had played an aggressive profile, risked everything, and lost it all?

"Yes, Master, I invested your money in the most aggressive, high-risk, high reward profile, and I got nothing to show for it."

And the third servant remained "lazy and evil."

How would the master respond to that second servant?

The success of a highly successful investor is not too surprising to us. Conversely, we can wrap our head around the debilitating cautiousness of the servant who buries the money.

But what about the ones who takes risks that don't always pan out the way we expected? Our returns are not what we anticipated. We enter a space where we might want to more risks like the faithful servant, but we are afraid of being perceived as the lazy one. No one wants to take risks if failure is perceived as incompetence.

Imagine that the second servant had returned empty-handed. I think he would have been spared. He expected a gracious, forgiving God, which allowed him to take some risks. The third servant expected God to be vindictive and angry, so he chose not to risk anything at all. What God do we expect?

Tom Long suggests that this parable is not about the moral character of the servants. It is not about a good and faithful servant versus evil and lazy ones. Rather, this parable is about the character of God. For the one servant who is cautious and risk-averse is the one who does not see God as generous and forgiving. He is ultimately confronted by his own worry about God's character as vindictive and angry: "I knew you were a hard man...and I was afraid."<sup>ii</sup>

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Seth Godin is a business consultant who helps people take risks. He parses the difference between risk, fear, and worry. Risk is all around us, he says. Whenever we encounter "potential points of failure," we see risk.<sup>iii</sup>

Fear, on the other hand, is a reaction to risk. However, he says that "while risk is real and external, fear exists only in our imagination. [...] Worry is the hard work of actively (and mentally) working against the fear."

We have a tendency to think that risk, fear, and worry are in cahoots with one another. We want to see risk, fear, and worry as one cohesive unit. But they aren't. Seth encourages people to see the three as "completely separate phenomena."

He writes, "It's possible to have risk (a good thing) without debilitating fear or its best friend, obsessive worry."

Jesus tells his disciples "fear not" throughout his ministry. Jesus reminds us that we belong to God, God is invested in us, and that we should allow tomorrow to worry about itself. Go ahead and take some risks. Give yourself freely.

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I am reminded of a congregation that did not take any risk because of their fear. I am certain many of you could provide plenty of examples. It was a congregation in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. It was the first church served by Fred Craddock. It was a small, aging congregation in a town that was changing rapidly because of developments in nuclear technology.

Oak Ridge became a place to produce and design nuclear energy. Along the hills of Oak Ridge, right across the street from the church, new types of housing emerged for the builders and laborers. People at the church saw this as temporary housing, such as trailer homes. Through an influx of new people, Oak Ridge started to take the form of a more working class city.

Two groups emerged in the church. The first group said: “We need to launch an invitational campaign to invite all of those people to church.” The other group said, “Oh, I don’t know. I don’t think they’d fit in here. They’re just here temporarily.”

The congregation decided to vote. The motion: In order to be a member of this church, you must own property in the county. The motion passed.

Many years later, Fred went back to that church to show his family where he had once served. He had a hard time finding the church because there had been so much change

Once he found it, he was surprised. The parking lot was full of trucks and motorcycles. The sign in front of the building said, “BBQ—all you can eat!” The pews lined the walls. The organ was pushed into a corner. There were all kinds of people eating at the tables.

Fred is a man who absolutely loves the church. But do you know what he said? He turned to his wife and said, “It’s a good thing this is not still a church, otherwise these people couldn’t be here.”<sup>iv</sup>

There is a cost to playing it safe. There is a cost to protecting God’s gifts as if they were ours to safeguard.

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When we look around the church today, we see a lot of congregations that feel a sense of crisis. There is a temptation to play it safe; to minister

cautiously; to be prudent and wise. We often think of stewardship as primarily the spending of the least amount of resources—saving what we can for tomorrow; and then, hopefully, having some type of impact in our world today.

Stewardship is not just about what God has provided for us in the past, nor is it about preserving what it is we have now. Stewardship is about what God is preparing for us in the future. How do we invest in what is yet to come? How are we invested in our Master's return?

Pastor John Buchanan once spoke to the value of this parable: "The biggest risk of all, it turns out, is not to risk anything, not to care deeply and profoundly enough about anything to invest deeply, to give your heart away and in the process risk everything. The greatest risk of all, it turns out, is to play it safe, to live cautiously and prudently."<sup>v</sup>

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Today, I want to invite you to think of stewardship as a time capsule. This could be a time capsule for the church of 2025, but we are not going to bury our best resources. Rather, this time capsule will be sending a message to the future that we are willing to try anything, do anything, for the proclamation of the Gospel, for the continuation of the ministry of Jesus Christ.

The time capsule we build through our gifts is to help take the whole Church to 2025 and beyond. We are going to find new ways for the church to serve the world; we are going to find new ways of telling God's story of relentless love and justice; and, hopefully, we are going to enter into the joy of our Lord.

As the Church, we have been given an opportunity to implement and design new models of ministry that tell God's story. This type of ministry is not about building the church of this year or next year. It is about looking ahead to 2025, and shaping and leading that church. The church of 2025 needs our resources. The church of 2025 is about trying new things—finding new ways of telling God's story of relentless love and justice. Building the church of 2025 begins now.

Montreat Presbyterian Church, I am preaching to the choir. You know this. You've run a congregation from the trunks of cars—on behalf of the church

of 2025, thank you! Your mission budget has been disproportionately generous compared to other congregations—thank you! You have resisted worry and fear because you believe in a gracious, forgiving God who expects you to take risks for the sake of the Gospel—thank you! You are becoming the Church of 2025 and beyond.

I recently ran across the words of the twentieth century writer Christopher Morley: “O cautious men who get us into trouble, and reckless dreamers have to get us out.”

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<sup>i</sup> John Boyle, “Asheville time capsule at site of former Asheville theater shows some things never change,” *Asheville Citizen Times*. 29 Oct 2011.

<http://archive.citizen-times.com/article/20111030/COLUMNISTS09/310300067>

<sup>ii</sup> Thomas G. Long, Matthew: Westminster Bible Companion, Westminster John Knox Press, 1997. 281 ff.

<sup>iii</sup> Seth Godin, “Risk, Fear, and Worry,”

[http://sethgodin.typepad.com/seths\\_blog/2012/07/risk-fear-and-worry.html](http://sethgodin.typepad.com/seths_blog/2012/07/risk-fear-and-worry.html).

Accessed 9 Oct 2015.

<sup>iv</sup> Fred Craddock, Stories, Chalice Press, 2001. 28.

<sup>v</sup> John Buchanan, “Pastoral Perspective,” Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 4. Westminster John Knox Press, 201. 310.