**Abundant Giving, Abundant Living**

**Text: Matthew 25:14-30**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

**Thanksgiving Sunday**

**November 19, 2017**

It sat there, up on the mantle, and I waited, and I waited and I waited. It was my birthday present; that much I knew. I was maybe 3 years old and my grandparents had come for Thanksgiving. It was one of the few years that they came to Chicago, because usually we spent Thanksgiving with them in Detroit. The day after Thanksgiving they bought the present for my early December birthday, and there it sat for what seemed like eternity. Must’ve been only 3 or 4 days, but that seemed like eternity to a little kid. Finally, the big day came, and I tore open that gift, and there was a shiny, metal, jack-in-the-box: with a neat little crank that I could turn to make music (it was Pop Goes the Weasel), and of course what POPED was the clown in the box. I *loved* that toy. Kept me entertained for hours. One day I turned the crank the other way and I said, “Hey, when I turn it this way I get a different song!” I was too dumb to realize that it was just Pop Goes the Weasel played backwards. But talk about being thankful! I thought I was the luckiest kid in the world.

Maybe the slaves in today’s scripture felt something like this: so very thankful for having been given an incredibly generous gift. The first slave received 5 talents, the second slave 2 and the third slave 1. And these were very generous gifts indeed because in 1st century Palestine, a talent was more than an average laborer would earn in *15 years*! 1 talent was more than 15 years worth of wages, and the first guy got *5* of them! To say that these guys were thankful is probably an understatement! And feeling so very thankful and blessed and self-confident – because a man of stature had expressed such confidence in them – the first 2 guys got busy and took some risks and made even more money.

The third guy…not so much. Far from being thankful, he was *fearful*. And in his fear he hid the money. And the outcome was not pretty.

Now, what we have here, of course, is a parable; or some would say an allegory. In an allegory, each character stands for something else, and so we have the master representing Jesus, and the slaves representing the Church. Remember, this is not just Jesus telling a parable to his disciples, this is Matthew retelling the stories of Jesus to his church; maybe 50 years later. As we noted last week, the Church in Matthew’s time was waiting for Jesus to return, and he was taking his own sweet time doing it. In fact, he’s *still* taking his own sweet time! As the parable says, after a *long* time, the master returned (Mt. 25:19). And he found that the talents that he’d entrusted to the first 2 slaves had doubled! To whom much had been given, exciting stuff had happened; and the result was abundance!

We said this is an allegory: if the master is Jesus and the slaves are the Church, the talents – the big bucks that were entrusted to them – are the spiritual gifts and abilities that God has given to the Church; the gifts and abilities that God has given to each of us individually and all of us collectively. In fact, the word “talent” comes into English as a word for abilities specifically because of this parable! So what Matthew is really saying to the Church is this: It’s going to be a long time before Jesus returns. In the meantime, God through Christ has given the Church an abundance of spiritual gifts, an abundance of skills and abilities, an abundance of talent. Your mission, should you decide to accept it, is to be responsible and creative with those skills and abilities and gifts. Take *risks* with them. Imagine the *new possibilities* that you can *create* with them. If you do so, you will reap an abundant harvest.

It all begins with a spirit of thanksgiving. When you’re feeling thankful, you’re feeling full and rich and blessed and you’re more likely to feel as if all things are possible. In fact, you might not really have all that much, but you’re so very thankful for what you *do* have; and with that attitude of gratitude, you’re more likely to take risks and do something with *whatever* you have.

If, on the other hand, you’re burdened with a “woe is me” attitude, then you’ve handicapped yourself. Your life might actually be filled with all *sorts* of blessings, but if you’re doubled over with that burden of woe, it’s kind of hard to see the blessings, much less do something with them. Out of a spirit of thanksgiving comes not only deep joy, but a posture with which to sow seeds and take risk. It’s kind of hard to sow seeds when you’re bent over with a burden of woe. It’s a whole lot easier when you’re standing tall with an attitude of gratitude.

I discovered this just before Thanksgiving almost 20 years ago. I was bearing a huge burden of woe. I’d taken on a bunch of responsibilities that I wasn’t particularly gifted for, I didn’t have the time to do them well, I wasn’t the least bit excited about them, and every day just felt like a huge burden. And then one day it dawned on me, “You know, I could let go of this stuff. The world’s not going to fall apart if I stop doing them. The stuff that’s *truly* important, someone else will pick-up; someone who actually has the gifts to do them. God will see to that. And the stuff that’s not important; well, it doesn’t matter if it doesn’t get done. So I resigned from some things, I started to say “No” to some other things, and all of a sudden, all sorts of new possibilities opened-up. I had this new sense of gratitude for life. I couldn’t wait for each day to begin. And I started to push the outside of the envelope in terms of saying risky things from the pulpit and asking parishoners to take on new challenges that they had the gifts to do: giving them permission, just like I’d given myself permission, to do what they were *gifted* to do, what they might have a *passion* to do, rather than the burdensome drudgery that often passes for mission in the life of the Church.

While the first 2 slaves waited for the master to return, they didn’t just wait: they received their talents with thanksgiving, and with those talents they took initiative and risk. And they doubled their blessing; they reaped an abundant harvest.

But, where there’s no initiative and no risk, there’s no abundant harvest. The third slave risked nothing, and he gained nothing. And the lesson for the Church is this: while we are waiting for Jesus to return, we too are called to take initiative and risk. The Church is called to be actively responsible with the gifts and the abilities – with the talents – that God has given us. That doesn’t mean just doing what we’ve always done. It could be letting go of *everything* that we’ve always done. Wouldn’t that be a huge risk?! If no one is excited about it – if it’s hard work to find someone to do it, then maybe we should just forget it! Try something else. Push the outside of the envelope. Take a risk that you might fail. And, yes, you *might* fail: the first time; maybe even the 10th time. But only those who risk failure will ultimately succeed.

114 years ago next month the Wright Brothers got their fragile little airplane off the ground and launched the age of powered flight. After their initial success with gliders they decided to add power and propellers but they had a problem: they didn’t know how to build a motor. They were bicycle mechanics, for crying out load. So a friend of a friend told them to talk to this one guy and Wilbur and Orville asked him, “Have you ever built a gasoline motor?” And he said, “Yeah, I built me one of those once….didn’t work, though.” That’s the guy who built their motor. Failure is far from fatal.

The Church is called to take initiative and risk. And when we do, that’s when we can hear Jesus saying, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

Being grateful for all that God has given us, we are called to act faithfully and thankfully by *trusting* God, and not fearing.

It’s kind of like standing on top of a mountain, and spreading your wings. Again, if you’re feeling burdened and put upon, you’re going to stand there like this (bent over). It’s only out of an attitude of gratitude that you can spread your wings. Just like the Wright Brothers: if the Church is to fulfill its calling, it has to spread its wings. This is Isaiah 40:31: “Those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount-up with wings as eagles. They shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.”

First you have to spread your wings. Then you have to take a deep breath. Of course, if you’re standing on top of a mountain, you can’t help but take a deep breath, because – more often than not – you’re surrounded by beauty. I don’t know about you all, but when I’m surrounded by beauty I just kind of go (deep breath)…oh my goodness! I’ve never been up Pike’s Peak – I’m told it’s a heck of a scary drive – but I’ve spent enough time in the Rockies to know that it’s well worth the risk because once you get to the top, looking out from the height of the Front Range over the High Plains of eastern Colorado, it is a sight to behold!

While we – the Church – wait for Jesus to return we have to spread our wings, take a deep breath, and trust our God. For our God is an *awesome* God. All things are possible through Him. The problem with the third slave is that he didn’t trust God, he didn’t trust himself, he didn’t even trust the fact that he’d been blessed. There he was with that awesome gift of 1 talent in his hand – and remember that even 1 talent was worth 15 years of wages – there he was with that *awesome* gift, and so blind was he to the blessing, so filled was he with fear, that he did nothing.

The only way to guarantee failure is to never try. But if we open our eyes to the blessings, if we give thanks for the blessings, if we realize that we’ve got spiritual capital to spend, then we’re more likely to take a leaf from Nike’s notebook and just DO IT! Because, however feeble our efforts might be, however fraught with failure they might become, God can pick-up the pieces of even our disasters, and make out of them something glorious.

Perhaps I’ve told you the story of the church in Meaford, Ontario – a few hours northwest of Toronto – where all of the stained glass windows are made-up of shards of broken glass. A Canadian army chaplain, as he made his way with the Allied forces from Normandy to Berlin in 1944 and ’45, stopped at the ruins of bombed-out churches and picked-up pieces of stained glass. When he came home, he gave them to the church in Meaford, and an artist blended them together into works of austere beauty. That’s the way that God picks up the shattered pieces of our failures. We can trust God to do that. But you have to risk that failure before you can behold that awesome beauty.

Somewhere up Lincoln Ave. there’s a sign that says, “A Thankful Receiver Bears a Plentiful Harvest.” In other words, out of joy and thanksgiving comes the courage for risk taking. There’s always a risk when you sow seeds. But sowing seeds is the only way to gather in a harvest. As those 2 thankful slaves pondered what to do with the abundant gifts that the master had given them, it’s as if they stood on a mountaintop. And there they spread their wings, took a deep breath and trusted God. Oh yes, and they did one more thing: they jumped!