

# WISE INVESTMENTS

by

Dr. L. James (Jim) Bankston

November 13, 2011

*(Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost)*

8:30 and 11:05 a.m.



## ST. PAUL'S

### UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

5501 Main Street

Houston, Texas 77004-6917

713-528-0527

[www.stpaulshouston.org](http://www.stpaulshouston.org)

**Texts:**

Judges 4:1-7; Psalm 123 or Psalm 76; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; and Matthew 25:14-30

**Matthew 25:14-30**

<sup>14</sup>“For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; <sup>15</sup>to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. <sup>16</sup>The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. <sup>17</sup>In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. <sup>18</sup>But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money.

<sup>19</sup>“After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. <sup>20</sup>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.’

<sup>21</sup>“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.’

<sup>22</sup>“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.’

<sup>23</sup>“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.’

<sup>24</sup>“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; <sup>25</sup>so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’

<sup>26</sup>“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? <sup>27</sup>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. <sup>28</sup>So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. <sup>29</sup>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. <sup>30</sup>As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’”

Last week I was asked to speak to a group of twelve young United Methodist clergy who are in a program called Advancing Pastoral Leadership, APL, apple, we call it. It is an initiative of our bishop to help young clergy in our conference develop pastoral skills necessary for leadership in the church. It is an intense and intentional two-year process for young clergy who are already doing ministry. I was given an hour and a half to talk to them about an assigned topic. My assigned topic was “Preaching for Transformation.” That is to say, how do you preach in such a way that makes a difference that actually changes lives? It was a tough assignment, but at the same time, a task that we are called to fulfill. All of us together should be becoming transformed, not to the ways of the world, but to the ways of Christ.

Obviously, that seldom happens instantaneously in one sermon, either to the listeners or to the one doing the preaching. I no more and no less than you need that transformation. What I told those young clergy about preaching for transformation is that it is to tell the deepest truth you know. It is, after all, the truth that sets you free. And anything that is not the truth can’t ultimately help anyone. You tell the deepest truth you know about life and about the scripture passage for the day’s sermon. Truth takes different directions in different contexts, but truth is transformational. So, that is what I try to do. Tell the deepest truth I can discern about a given passage of scripture and about life, which is always related. I do believe that the stories of the Bible contain truths that are transformational for our lives, all of the stories of the Bible if you look deep enough.

Certainly among the more fascinating stories in the Bible to mine for truth are the parables of Jesus. The one before us today is just about perfect, the Parable of the Talents. What is the deepest truth of this parable? Most of you know the story line well. A man is going on a journey; he calls his slaves and entrusts them with large sums of money, each according to his ability. That is curious. He didn’t give any instructions, any lectures, any guidelines. Just, here’s the money. I’m gone for a while. One slave was given five talents, one two and one one. A talent was a large sum of money, maybe as much as 20-years wages. Many of Jesus’ parables often include exaggerated elements to make a point.

Each slave, even the one with only one talent, was entrusted with a large sum of money. In the story, the one who has been given five talents doubled his money in trading, an interesting way to make money in light of some things in our world today. It sounds eerily contemporary. The one with two talents doubled his money also in the same way. And we all know that the one talent slave dug a hole and buried the money in the ground, which was accepted practice to secure money in that day and time. When the slave owner returns to settle accounts, he of course is pleased with the two that made him more money, and he is not pleased with the one that didn't make anything. The successful traders are given more responsibility and the fearful slave has his one talent taken from him and is cast into the outer darkness. What is the deepest truth we can tell about this parable?

Now there are some troubling aspects about this parable. There are questions of clarification that we all might want to ask. For instance, is it effort that the master commends or is it success? If the successful traders had tried and failed and lost everything and the one who buried the talent at least had one to give back, who would have been commended? Is the parable about the bottom line, money, or is it about effort, doing the best you can with what you have been given? Of course that is the conventional way of understanding this parable. The first two slaves did what they could with what they had. They took a risk; they were rewarded with success, and the master was pleased. The fearful slave did not even make an effort. He did nothing with what the master entrusted to him. The message for us becomes, be bold, use the ability you have been given to the best of your ability. Do not waste what has been given you. That's usually the way we interpret this parable.

But there is another way to look at this parable. The parables of Jesus are never as simple as they might seem at first glance. And there are some concerns with that first interpretation. For instance, why would Jesus allow the leading character to be a slave owner, a harsh one at that, one who reaps where he does not sow and gathers where he does not scatter? And let's remember, the slaves who double the money don't get to keep it. They are, after all, slaves, and whatever they make goes to the slave master. Maybe the one talent person was right to be afraid of him, to be cau-

tious. Perhaps this is not a parable about the Kingdom of God that we are to emulate, but rather a parable about the ways of the world from which we are to be transformed. The parable does not begin saying, as many do, “the Kingdom of God is like...” Rather, it just says, “It is as if...” and then tells the story.

If you see this parable about the ways of the world, then the one talent slave becomes the hero. He is the one that won't play along with a system that involves an absentee slave holder who is harsh and ruthless and dishonest. He pays the price like every other prophet before him who has challenged an unjust system. He is discredited by being labeled as wicked and lazy and even what he has is taken from him and given to the one who already has more than he needs. And he is thrown into the outer darkness, that is cast out of the system and the main stream.

This is certainly a more radical interpretation of the parable, but if you think about it, it makes some sense. One commentator said it could even be seen as autobiographical for Jesus, who in just a couple of days will pay the prophet's price himself by being crucified on a cross for challenging an unjust system. And the very last parable he tells, beginning in the very next verse, which we will read next week, is the Parable of the Last Judgment, where people are judged by how they treat the least and the last: the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the homeless, the sick and the imprisoned. It makes at least as much sense in the context of who Jesus is and considering what is about to happen to him, and given the parable that follows, to take the more radical interpretation here as it might to take the first interpretation.

Ah, the parables of Jesus. Just a simple story but with many layers of possible meanings. What is the deepest truth we can tell about this parable and about life? However you interpret it, business as usual in the ways of the world is very different from a transformed life after the manner of Christ. To put it very simply, the deepest truth is that the ways of Christ are different from the ways of the world.

When it is your opportunity to act, do you have the faith and personal integrity to do the right thing?

Where were the people at Penn State University in the recently revealed scenario that should have acted to address horrible crimes against young children?

Where are people who will not play along in some of our more notorious business scandals in our nation?

But it is easy to make this always about someone else. You and I are also called to live a Christ-like life in all of our dealings and relationships. And maybe the deepest truth is that there is a price to pay if you do, but a greater price to pay if you don't. At the end of the day, all any of us has left is the possibility of having acted in a given opportunity with personal integrity. Jesus uses a story about life in the real world that everyone understood to teach us about how life is and how it could be when someone acts with faith and courage.

May the truth of Christ transform all of us.