

“A SOLID INVESTMENT STRATEGY”

Matthew 25:14-30

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Not since the Great Depression of the 1930's has the stock market been as volatile as it is today. The typical portfolio has lost at least 20% of its value, and it is not clear that we have hit bottom. The housing market is in crisis, and the government bailout program, hastily passed by a nervous Congress, has yet to engender the confidence in the economy that its authors intend. As we are becoming more and more aware, the financial crisis is worldwide, yet nowhere are its effects more obvious than here in Cleveland, where the sale of National City Bank puts another cloud in an already gray sky.

The important thing, we are told, is not to panic. Hold steady. This crisis, too, shall pass. In the meantime, there are enterprising companies and individuals who are more than willing to give us advice on how to make the most of this uncertain economic situation, how we can get ahead of the rest of the pack. I keep getting letters and e-mails from investment advisors encouraging me to buy while prices are low, buy American, buy their product. Advice abounds. There are dinners and lunches — free lunches, if you will — where advice and investment strategies are offered. Even as belt tightening occurs throughout our society, from top to bottom, there are plenty of people ready and willing to sell us that new, smaller belt. After all, it's the American way!

What do you do when times are tough? Well, one thing you do is to take inventory of what is really important in your life. I have been extremely pleased that in the midst of a difficult economic climate our stewardship campaign is becoming the most successful campaign in years. At Church of the Saviour, the average pledge is up by 8 - 10% over last year, and we are receiving pledges from a significant number of people who have not pledged to the church in the past. We all know how important the church is to us for the spiritual well-being not only of ourselves, but of our children and youth. We all know the importance of the many outreach programs that are making a significant difference in the community and in the world today. I thank God that this congregation is not only willing to continue to fund the work of Christ and the church, but to increase its support in these challenging economic times.

All of us want to protect our investments as best we can and not lose what we have worked so hard to gain, myself included. Again I ask, how do we cope with tough economic times? What do you do when things get rough? A man came into my office recently. He had lost his job of many years. It was not that he has been a slacker. He has given every ounce of energy he has to the company. It's just that they had to cut back, and his job was one of those that had to go.

In defense of the “worthless slave” in our parable, he did what he thought was best.

There being no banks in the days of first century Palestine, this man did what seemed prudent: he buried his gold bullion in the back yard. At least he did not lose money! He preserved the principal. That's more than any of us have been able to do over the last six months!

Do you realize what a responsibility had been given to all three of these people? A "talent" was a unit of measurement, the highest one that existed in the ancient world. According to the commentators, a talent was perhaps equivalent to as much as a laborer's salary for twenty years. In today's terms, \$ 3 million, \$ 1 million and \$ 600,000 were given to these slaves.(1) They were not dealing with pocket change!

Now note that the two who were given five talents and two talents — read five buckets and two buckets of solid gold — doubled their money! How did they do it? Did they run into the ancient equivalent of Bill Gates, who had this idea, and bought while stock was low, in the days when computers were just an idea in somebody's head? Did they buy into a cell phone company ten years ago before nearly everybody in the world was using cell phones? Did they discover the idea of selling water in bottles and then watch their assets go through the roof? What was their secret? How many people do you know that have doubled their money lately?

Yet the hefty profits of the five talent and two talent folks do not surprise us too much. They provide us with one more example of what we already know, that "the rich get richer, and the poor get shafted."

Then there is the commendation by the owner, the one who gave these generous gifts in the first place, whom we assume to be God. "*Well done, good and trustworthy slave.*" (Another translation says, "*Well done, good and faithful servant.*") Who would not want to hear that word of praise and affirmation for a job well done? It would be well worth all our efforts just to hear those words of appreciation from the Almighty.

But there is more to the story. The master says, "*You have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things.*" Here again we are reminded of a valuable lesson. We often assume that if we do a good job at something we can sit back and take it easy for a while. This parable reminds us that the reward for a job well done is more work to do! God calls us not to do something for him and then be done with it. He calls us to increasing devotion and deeper levels of service as we progress along life's journey. I know a man who decided to give a Saturday or two to work on a Habitat House. But he told me that he got hooked. He saw the need. He saw the appreciation of those who were benefitting by the construction. He saw what a difference he was making, and rather than to do his little bit and then walk away, he committed himself to work with Habitat on an ongoing basis.

Remember that I have said parables are stories that make one point. I am convinced that the point of this parable is not that the rich get richer, or that if you invest well you will be handsomely rewarded. It is not even that the reward for a job well done is more work to do, although there is a grain of truth in all of these observations. The message of this parable can be summed up in three words: **invest yourself totally**. Risk everything you have for the sake of the Gospel.

The "talents" that the investors were given are the gifts and skills that God has given us. We all have God-given abilities. The temptation is to underestimate these gifts and the importance of using them. Theologian Edward Schweizer comments on this parable, "*God's gifts can never be passively possessed; it is like a muscle; it must be worked and stretched or it withers.*"(2)

Emily was afraid to take her turn at bat when she first played softball. She was afraid that she would strike out. Her coach patiently encouraged and worked with her. Often Emily heard his calm but firm words: “If you don’t swing the bat, you can’t hit the ball.” Emily grew to understand that everyone strikes out sometimes, and the greater failure is never to swing the bat. Jesus, in telling the parable of the talents, is encouraging his followers to “swing the bat” and to trust God. The parable reminds us that love for our master must be demonstrated in faith and untiring service to other people.

I was at a wedding reception recently where they did the “Hokey Pokey.” We’ve all done the Hokey Pokey. “You put your right arm in, you put your right arm out.” It goes on with our left arm, your right foot, and your left foot. Finally, “You put your whole self in.” That’s the point of this parable! **Put your whole self in.** Commit yourself totally to following Jesus.

Is there risk involved? Of course there is. Discipleship is not easy. When we are challenged and threatened, how will we respond? What a temptation it is for all of us to take what we have and bury it in the ground rather than to risk it in today’s volatile marketplace!

It was C.S. Lewis who said, “To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket — safe, dark, motionless, airless — it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy, is damnation. The only place outside heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is hell.”(3) How much of yourself will you risk? What is your investment strategy?

Have you thought lately about what you have to invest? The parable tells of three folks who were given what was for them a staggering amount of money — too much to count or contemplate. Good readers of the Bible know that when you come into money, the thing to do is to give it away. And when you do, it multiplies itself. The three people in the parable were given something amazing — a reckless, unearned, unheard-of trust. Recognizing the daring of their master, two of them responded with daring, courageously doubling what they had been given.

My friends, we have an enormous, uncountable, unimaginable treasure — Jesus. The only way to keep this treasure is to give it away. Then it comes back, doubled, in the form of others who love Jesus with us.

In trying times, the temptation is to dig a hole and bury what we have been given, to try to preserve our assets as best we can. We can play it safe, risk nothing, and keep what we have as long as we can hang on to it; or we can invest ourselves in the lives of our families, neighbors, co-workers and friends, and trust God for the results. The Bible is pretty clear about which investment strategy Jesus recommends.

So, **put your whole self in.** Give your whole self, not because you have to, not because you need to, but because it is the only way to find the abundant life that Jesus promises to you and to me. For, as St. Francis reminds us, it is in giving that we receive, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Prayer: Dear God, as we consider our investment strategy, help us to realize that everything we have is a gift from you. We believe that you are calling us to put our whole selves into life. May

we not hold back, but invest ourselves totally in the things of the spirit. In Jesus' name we pray.
Amen.

Notes:

1. Strandjord, Jeanette. *The Clergy Journal*. Vol. 84., No.7., p. 66.
2. Schweizer, Eduard. *The Good News According to Matthew*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1975., p. 472.
3. Lewis, C.S., *The Four Loves*. Quoted in *Pulpit Resource*. Vol. 33. No. 4., p. 40.