

1 Thessalonians 5: 1-11
Matthew 25: 14-30
November 16, 2014
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

Many years ago the United Negro College Fund had a slogan: "A mind is a terrible thing to waste." At the time this was more than a good fund raising slogan. It was a radical affirmation that African Americans were human beings with minds every bit as alert and capable as white people. In southwestern Ohio where I grew up, this was not a commonly held view. Indeed, those who stood up for the equal humanity of African Americans were often labeled "communists." There were signs calling for the impeachment of Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren for the court's overturning of "separate but equal" schools for black people in the historic case of *Brown vs the Board of Education* of Little Rock, Arkansas. To insist that African Americans had a mind to waste was controversial. I'd like to think that such a thought would be unthinkable these days. Sadly, I don't think racism is dead in our country. But that is a subject for another time.

Recently, this same foundation has come out with an expansion of the original slogan. It now goes this way: "A mind is a terrible thing to waste...but a great thing to invest in." I like that change. It says that the solution to the problem of wasted minds is not to stand apart and blame society for the ongoing tragedy of wasted human potential. The solution is *investment*.

The word "investment" indicates a committing of time, effort, love, faith and often money to something or someone in the expectation of a return. We most often hear the word spoken in connection with the investing of money in a business. We buy stock in a company in hopes that the company will prosper and give back to us a portion of its profits.

Yet the slogan of the United Negro College Fund seeks to solicit funds where the return on investment has no financial reward. The return on investment is in the realizing of human potential. That the fulfillment of human potential is of material benefit to the community is beyond doubt. However this is not the primary object. Human potential is worth investing in for its own sake.

As Christians we understand this. We know that God created human beings not for our utility to him. God does not *need* us. God created human beings, to borrow from Paul Stookey, “for the love of it all.” God wanted a portion of creation to be able to return to him the sheer joy and wonder of being alive. In addition, God created human beings in his likeness so that we might catch a glimpse of creation through his eyes and extend his creativity—not for any reason other than the pleasure of creating out of love and gratitude.

In short, God *invested* God’s very life into human beings. All God wanted and continues to want as a return on his investment is for humanity to join together in a song of praise and gratitude *and* a commitment on our part to extend God’s investment in each other with no other expectation than that in the end every human being of every generation rejoices in this incredible gift of life—for no other reason than “the love of it all.”

This I propose is the back drop for Jesus’ parable of the talents.

It may surprise you that the word “talent” refers to the weight of an amount of silver. It was used as a form of exchange in business. There was no talent coin. Nevertheless scholars estimate that a talent was equal to roughly 6,000 denarii or a daily wage for a common day laborer for 6,000 days, or around twenty years of work. A talent translated into *a lot* of money!

It is obvious then, that when Jesus refers to the talents that this rich man gave his slaves to manage in his absence, he is exaggerating. To one slave he gives 5,000 talents. This represents 30 *million denarii!*—roughly 82,000 days wages. The next slave receives 2,000 talents and the next 1,000 talents. Both of these amounts, while smaller are massive amounts of wealth.

Jesus clearly is not talking about mere financial management. He wants his hearers to recognize that the rich man is investing in the people who are his servants. It is an investment of trust as much as an investment of money. What return will he receive? Clearly he does not need more wealth. Instead when he returns he wants to see what happened because of his investment.

When the man returns he asks for an accounting. Two of the slaves have *invested their talents* and made have doubled what they were given. The man is pleased! Well done! Since you have been faithful in being stewards of this—to him—small amount you shall be given more opportunities to serve. Once again we see that the rich man's investment is about human development and the extending of his resources through the servants. Then comes the third slave. He thinks harshly of his master and is afraid of him. He has done nothing with the talents. He has buried the silver into the ground. Neither he nor his master nor the world is better for the investment. The master is furious in his disappointment. And note the punishment he gives: the 1,000 talents are taken away and given to the first two servants. What does this imply? Clearly it was the master's intent that the servants *keep the original investment!*

In this light the words of the master which sound so unjust make perfect sense: “To those that have, more will be given, and they will have abundance. But from those who have nothing even what they have will be taken away.”

Remember that Jesus is not talking about money. He is speaking of God’s spiritual investment of his love and creativity into human beings. It is a simple case of “use it or lose it.” As Mary Chapin Carpenter quotes in one of her songs, “We have two lives: one we’re give and the other one we make.” Or as someone else has said, “Life is God’s gift to us. What we do with it is our gift to God.”

I deeply believe that if the servant who buried the talents had taken a worldwide journey and come home full of knowledge, wisdom and renewed appreciation for the gift of life and a determination to encourage others to make great things of this gift of life, his master would have been overjoyed. I also do not think the ungrateful servant had to be thrown into the darkness—he was already there.

Is it an accident that in the very next teaching Jesus gives in Matthew he pictures the Son of Man returning to see what his subjects have done with their lives? Is it an accident that he is looking for a return on his investment in terms of the feeding of the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and those in prison, comforting the bereaved, receiving those who are rejected and testifying to the reality of God’s kingdom where all human beings are worth investing in?

I think not! And it may help to know that at root, the word “invest” means to clothe; that is, to provide the protection from the hostile forces of life so that a person may realize her or his preciousness as a creation of God who sent Jesus into the world to reclaim. Because in

God's view not only is a mind a terrible thing to waste, but also an immortal soul. And like the mind. the soul is a wonderful thing to invest in. Amen.