

“Proceed and be Bold”

from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
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Readings: Matthew 25:14-30

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There is so much to say this morning, and so little time in which to say it. One has to choose wisely among the several options presented to us.

For example, there is the text, familiar to many of you, not necessarily a favorite of any. We may take the time to ask, “In which of the three servants do we see ourselves?” (Two acted boldly and did well, as least by the usual standards of measure. The third one took no chances with the money entrusted to him. He did not earn interest but he didn’t lose any of his employer’s money either). Yet it is the third one, who played it safe, with whom Jesus appears to be least pleased as he tells the parable. We wonder what is going on.

Other things we could look at this morning include what the many commentaries say about this parable. That could take hours. And then there is the day before us, Stewardship Dedication Sunday, standing before us like a great open door through which we are invited to walk with little assurance that we can fulfill the obligations to the church’s mission we may make today.

And did I mention the (formerly) tanked U.S. economy that we all hope is slowly coming out of recession? And what of the European economy and the critically delicate matter of economic stability in Italy and Greece? How will that affect our investments here at home? We do wonder what will become of our financial portfolios before the economy stabilizes.

And then, certainly not least of all, there is this matter of what each of us is going to do about a pledge to the church in these less than certain times. I mean, we don't even know who the next pastor and head of staff will be. And on top of that we are in the opening months of an important capital improvement campaign for building repairs that can no longer be ignored. Is this any way to run an organization that is supposed to provide solace in a complicated and confusing world?

The answer to that last one, I believe, is "yes", and the reasons are downright biblical, but that isn't going to make you like them any better. One reason we can live with all this complication and confusion is that we live by faith. Ultimately, as well as from day to day, you and I live by faith. We live by the faith that God's ways will prevail over the ways of evil. We live by faith that we are not alone. We live by faith that somebody cares and the Somebody is none other than the God who created us out of nothing. These are, along with others, insights to the faith that is ours. They give us perspective and help to keep us mentally and emotionally balanced.

You can hear such perspective being offered, for example, in this parable of the talents. It can be summarized in the following way: **Those who act boldly with the gifts God has given them can anticipate a good return.** How else are we to interpret the story's lifting up of the two servants who acted boldly with what had been entrusted to them and the condemnation of the one who played it safe? Jesus seems to be saying that God rejoices when we act with boldness in the face of what are often great unknowns.

So translated into contemporary idiom the cautious voice sounds like this: "How can I make a bold pledge when I don't know what the economy will be doing a year from now?" The same way people pledged to marry in the midst of the Great Depression. The same way people buy a new car in this economy because the car is a commuting necessity. The same way people pledge to help a friend who is in a metaphorical "ditch" even though every day is already filled with other obligations.

Jesus never said, "Follow me and we'll take it easy together." He simply said, "Follow me," (and we'll figure out the rest together). It's understandable that

we don't like this pattern for our future but it happens to be God's way and God seems to think it is a good way for us to live. In fact, if you want a perspective on the entire New Testament, the suggestion here is that living by faith is the only way to live.

I've been inspired over the last fifteen years by the story of an architecture professor at Auburn named Samuel Mockbee. Sambo, as he was called by his friends, founded The Rural Studio at that Alabama University in 1992. He lived less than ten years after that, dying in his late fifties of leukemia. But his vision and commitment to making architecture about society, not just art, lives on. Students of architecture, approximately ten a year, spend almost twelve months in Hale County, AL, the second poorest county in the state, designing and building houses for people who live below the poverty line. The result is some of the most creative and practical modern house design anyone has yet seen.

In 2000 Mockbee won a MacArthur "genius" grant. "In 2004 the American Institute of Architects honored him, posthumously, with their most prestigious award, the AIA Gold Medal—less, presumably, for a body of work than for translating convictions about ethical architecture into a successful educational and social program."¹ The program has been the inspiration for other design/build programs across the country. It was Sam Mockbee who encouraged his students to "Proceed and Be Bold." And it is that encouraging word that kept coming to mind as I thought about a perspective on what we are doing today on a pledge dedication Sunday.

Bold challenges today, such as those before any church like this one, require bold action on the part of every member. At the very time we would like to play it safe, here is our Lord calling us to risk faith in that which we hope for but cannot yet see.

¹ Andrea Oppenheimer Dean and Timothy Hursley, *Proceed and Be Bold: The Rural Studio After Samuel Mockbee*, (New York, Princeton Architectural Press, 2005) introduction, pp. 7-17.

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Our parable of the talents has several players but only one really matters: the one in whom you or I see ourselves. Many will choose to see themselves acting boldly as did the two who invested what had been given them to care for while the master was away. We get the idea that bold action wins Jesus' favor. The one who takes no risk, burying his treasure, wins no points with Jesus.

We see that although the second servant had less to invest he is still commended by his master for his wise investing.

And the first servant, to whom the most was given, won the highest praise of them all. He too invested wisely and made a fine return on the investment.

It is this first fellow, the one given five bags of gold, who intrigues me most: I find myself thinking of contemporary parallels to his imaginative and bold behavior. He does not play it safe yet neither does he act recklessly with high risk investments. He invests in what seems to have manageable risk yet requires bold action on his part. He is like a man who writes a column several times a week in the newspaper, deciding to speak his conscience and boldly declare who he considers the strongest candidate in the 2012 presidential race. He is not commended by all his readers for the choice but he is acknowledged to have cleared the air and helped all see the strengths and weaknesses of the leading candidates.

Or, he is like a woman in her eighties, blessed with good health, who decides to move from the retirement home she and her late husband had gone to a decade earlier. She wants to go back home where she came from, buy a house, and live out her days. She will be living alone but she will enjoy the freedom she has been missing. She will have to begin driving again, making her own meals, caring for the house. But it will be a life in which she is in control. It is a risk she is willing and eager to take.

Or, it is like a man who retires early and takes up painting, portrait painting to be precise. He is no Thomas Sully but he is good enough to earn a living and win the esteem of his peers.

Or, it is like a woman who decides it is never too late to go beyond the superficial understanding she has about God. She wants a broader outlook on the interpretation of Scripture. She knows there is much she does not understand and decides that now is a good time in her life to pour her energy into an effort to discover all she can about God and God's word to us. She may find hermeneutics challenging but it will be worth the risk of realizing how little she knows and how much there is to learn. She applies to the seminary to audit several courses.

As I work on these contemporary parallels to our parable I realize that some may be closer to the spirit of the original than others. Yet the motivation to be bold, to explore something unpredictable, the courage to take on a challenge, the readiness to find new freedom and reward in the pursuit of a bold goal is common to all of these examples. You can think of others that apply especially to you.

There is yet a deeper level of understanding possible with this parable of the talents. Beyond the realization that Jesus admires those who live by faith, seeking ways to act with boldness in pursuit of a noble cause, there is also here the undercurrent of thought that "to whom much is given, much is required." Those blessed with ability, wisdom, intelligence, financial resources, vision and an adventurous spirit are obligated to share their gifts. This does not come to us as news. We have heard this before and we know that sometimes it applies to us. We may not have been given five bags of gold last week but we do know something about having been given gifts that can be shared with and benefit others. While some may prefer to believe that their success is self-made, most know that whatever they have acquired or accomplished comes as a gift from God.

I think of people who have been asked to chair a committee in the church at a time in their lives when one more task is the last thing they need. Yet, as it turns out, this new job is exactly the stretch they needed to move them into new discovery.

I think of physicians who take the effort to spend several weeks a year in a distant land treating patients with diseases that have disappeared in most places.

I think of retired business people who join SCORE (Service Corps of Retired Executives) to share their wisdom and experience in business with others who are struggling with their own companies. These people know that having gifts

puts them in a position of obligation to give back something of themselves. Their work with others is seen not as duty but as opportunity.

The problem such bold and giving people have with the third servant in our story, the one who buried his treasure, is that “he really is interested only in himself and, consequently security, not service, is his goal,” writes commentator Douglas Hare.² “There is not the slightest trace of gratitude that his master trusted him with so great a sum. Respect for his master is limited to a grudging acknowledgement of power.”³

He is anything but grateful for the opportunity put in his care. He is anxious about this new responsibility and seeks to avoid his master’s judgment should anything happen to the gift entrusted to him. But by burying the treasure he brings on the very judgment he had attempted to avoid.

The story Jesus tells seems to say that dealing with our gifts for service is part of living a life with God. We can resent such gifts and spend a lifetime denying that we have them or we can embrace the gifts, cultivate them and share them. Doing that will sometimes engage us in bold endeavors. But remember who it is who encourages such bold behavior, such living by faith: none other than the God of our creation, the Lord of life, even Jesus Christ.

² Douglas R.A. Hare, *Matthew: Interpretation Series Commentary* (Louisville, John Knox Press, pp. 286-287).

³ Ibid.