

A SERMON PREACHED ON SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 19, 2017

AT BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH, BETHANY BEACH, DE

An American investment banker was at the pier of a small coastal Greek village when a small boat with just one fisherman docked. Inside the small boat were several large yellow fin tuna.

The American complimented the Greek on the quality of his fish and asked, "How long does it take to catch them?" The Greek replied: "Only a little while."

The American then asked why didn't he stay out longer and catch more fish? The Greek said he had enough to support his family's immediate needs. The American then asked, "But what do you do with the rest of your time?"

The Greek fisherman said, "I sleep late, fish a little, play with my children, take siesta with my wife, Maria, stroll into the village each evening where I sip wine and play cards with my friends, I have a full and busy life."

The American scoffed, "I am a Harvard MBA and could help you. You should spend more time fishing and with the proceeds, buy a bigger boat with the proceeds from the bigger boat you could buy several boats, eventually you would have a fleet of fishing boats."

Instead of selling your catch to a middleman you would sell directly to the processor, eventually opening your own cannery. You would control the product, processing and distribution.

You would need to leave this small coastal fishing village and move to Athens, then London and eventually New York where you will run your expanding enterprise."

The Greek fisherman asked, "But, how long will this all take?" To which the American replied, "15-25 years."

"But what then?" The American laughed and said that's the best part. "When the time is right you would announce an IPO and sell your company stock to the public and become very rich, you would make millions."

"Millions ... Then what?" The American said, "Then you would retire. Move to a small coastal fishing village where you would sleep late, fish a little, play with your kids, take siesta with your wife, stroll to the village in the evenings where you could sip wine and play cards with your friends."

Ah, the value of investments. Jesus seems to be telling us something about how we are to invest in the kingdom of God in this very convoluted parable, the last we will hear from Matthew this year, as soon we will heading into Advent and a new liturgical season that takes place according to the witness of the gospel writer Mark. But Matthew insists on his final word, once again telling us about life in the kingdom of God, predicting his second coming, and warning of the end times, "that we should use our gifts, while we still have time, for the greater and common good."<sup>ii</sup> There is an eschatological theme here (an end of the world vista), a new life theme, a stewardship theme, and a Thanksgiving theme, all rolled into one. Like any good parable, one can come away from the text having learned many lessons.

The lessons about savings and investments are the easy ones to comprehend. We of a certain age group (most of us gathered here this morning) have done well with our savings, which is obvious since we are here to tell the story. The generations that have risen after us have not followed in our footsteps so well. It is said that one out of three Americans has no retirement savings, and most Americans (69%) have less than \$1000 in savings. I have a theory about why this is true, at least for the younger crowd. In my earlier days as a pastor I used to go into the high schools and talk to 8<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> graders about what was on their mind, especially concerning sex, politics, and religion. Most young people I spoke with, I'd say more than 80%, felt they would not reach the age of 30 before they died; more than one-third were concerned that they would even reach 21. So the mantra then was, as the singer Prince sang with swagger, "let's party like it's 1999" (a rejoinder to the millions who thought the new millennium would bring about the end of the world). When the end of the world did not come in 2000, the millennials, as we called them, did not make any major changes in their lives. The events of 9/11/2001 made the end of life at a young age even more likely, and since the world seemed unsafe and out of control, no change in attitudes was yet forthcoming. Many young folk felt then, as they do now, that life had passed them by, and that hope and planning for the future are meaningless words that belong to religion, a subject that has nothing to offer and speaks via ungraspable realities. The gospel for this morning would do little to allay their fears, as we see with the prudent saver who is afraid of his overbearing master and hides his wealth in a hole in the ground, returning to the overseer the goods just as they had been given him. For this he is thrown out of the kingdom into the darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Wow! Who knew that God was so interested in investments, and top-tier at that (since the text tells us whoever does not have, even what little they possess will be taken from them!)? Where is the good news here? Does not this sound like the angry God of the Old Testament speaking?

Thank heavens for biblical author and interpreter Ray Stedman. In his essay, "Living Dangerously,"<sup>iii</sup> he unpacks the meaning of this gospel in a way that is both helpful and hopeful. He explains, first of all, that the currency being used here - "talent," in some translations, "gold or silver" in others - was merely property - God's property, at that - given to each individual. Everyone owns something, and in the end, other than our lives, we can't take the property with us. That is why we leave it to others for their usage, and to pass on if it can be helpful to support future generations. And so, Stedman asks, "What do we professed Christians have which is God's peculiar property, which comes to us on the basis of natural ability [talents], which requires a risk on our part, and that risk appears to benefit only the Lord and not ourselves? Can [we] answer that?"

Well, look at it this way. Having certain natural abilities, what do [we] then look for? Recognizing that [we] have a particular gift, what do [we] then seek? Is it not an opportunity to use that gift? Do we not all look for such opportunities, young and old alike? As we grow up and feel our powers developing, do we not then look for some opportunities to use them? And the more talents we feel we have the more we look for occasions for expression.

So the talents of the parables are to us golden moments of opportunity.<sup>iv</sup> Ah, this is good! And obviously, as is seen in the admonition given to the third investor, they involve being willing to take a risk. Here is where both the apex and the crux of the gospel lie. The final message of Jesus in telling this story is "Step out! Risk! Live dangerously! Take constant chances with your life and goods for his name's sake. Don't try to bottle up your life so as to hang on to it at all costs. If you do that you will surely lose it. But surrender yourself to his cause, again and again. That is the way to find life. That is the way to watch for his coming. Having risked yourself to become a Christian, now risk yourself again and again as opportunities arise. Live dangerously!"

Or that also could be written, love dangerously! To live for Christ is to love [others] with his love. And that is always a risk. It has been well written:

"To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be 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 around with hobbies and little luxuries, avoid all entanglements, lock it up safe in the casket or the 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 only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is hell."<sup>v</sup> And while I'm not a great believer in hell, other than that which I have experienced on this earth, I know that God is love, so that means that in love all things are possible, and so I place my talents, my gold and silver, my opportunities of life in its hands, in God's hands, where I know greater things will be done than I can ask for or imagine.

One of the things we will be asked to do this week is to take the opportunity to pause, on one special day, to give thanks for all that we have been given, and to risk opening our hearts to receive gifts of food and drink and fellowship with others. Thanksgiving Day, especially as so many of us celebrate it around the dinner table, is a time fraught with possibilities. More families have come away from the table with new hurts and remnants of the old ones than I care to mention. I'd ask that we remember why it is that we celebrate this occasion, keeping in mind the spirit of the Creator and the creators of this holiday whose legacy has come down to us in the form of a day off of work for most Americans, as well as a meal with loved ones, friends, and even sometimes, strangers. The "first Thanksgiving," was neither a feast nor a holiday, but a simple gathering. Following the *Mayflower's* arrival at Plymouth Rock on December 11, 1620, the Pilgrims suffered the loss of 46 of their original 102 colonists. With the help of 91 Native Americans from the Wamponoag tribe, the remaining Pilgrims survived the bitter winter and yielded a bountiful harvest in 1621, and so they celebrated that wonderful moment in their history.<sup>vi</sup> In 1863, President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed a national day of thanksgiving to be held each year in November, and therefore we do now yearly celebrate it as proscribed.

Thanksgiving can take on many forms. "In the Bible, the meaning of thanksgiving reflected adoration, sacrifice, praise, or an offering. Thanksgiving was a grateful language to God as an act of worship. Rarely, if ever, was thanksgiving extended to any person or thing, except God. "These things I remember as I pour out my soul; how I used to go with the multitude, leading the procession to the house of God, with shouts of joy and thanksgiving among the festive throng" (says Psalm 42:4). Long before the colonists celebrated their successes, Nehemiah assembled two great choirs to give thanks for God's faithfulness in rebuilding the wall. "The Levites were sought out from where they lived and were brought to Jerusalem to celebrate joyfully and to dedicate songs of thanksgiving with the music of cymbals, harps, and lyres" (says Nehemiah 12:27).

The true meaning of Thanksgiving therefore focuses upon relationship. Thanksgiving is a relationship between God and humankind. Upon their arrival at New Plymouth, the Pilgrims composed The Mayflower Compact, which honored God. Thanksgiving begins with acknowledging God as faithful, earnestly giving God thanks, in advance, for God's abundant blessings. Thanksgiving is an attitude of the heart that reinforces an intimate relationship with God.<sup>vii</sup> So as we watch the afternoon football games and ponder that second helping of pie, may we remember that we are all God's children, all gifts of God's creation, all deserving of the opportunities of life, all called to love and help one another, especially the less fortunate of the

crowd, all doorkeepers to the beloved community of God which is called God's kingdom, all called to share our blessings, our talents, our earnings to the greater glory of God. Then it will be said of us that we are worthy of our name: true Believers in God and Disciples of Christ.

And okay, here's a one-liner if things get boring at the Thanksgiving table and you need to interject some humor (albeit it corny): Why can't you take a turkey to church? They use FOWL language.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.greekshares.com/investing-education/jokes-and-humor>

<sup>ii</sup> Sundays and Seasons, Year A, November 19, 2007, p. 307

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.raystedman.org/new-testament/matthew/living-dangerously>

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid.* Stedman at the end quotes C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*.

<sup>vi</sup> <https://www.allabouthistory.org/meaning-of-thanksgiving.htm>

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.*