

Wise Investing

By
The Reverend Dr. Agnes W. Norfleet
from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

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Micah 6:6-8

⁶“With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? ⁷Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” ⁸He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Matthew 25:14-30

¹⁴“For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his servants and entrusted his property to them; ¹⁵to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away.

¹⁶The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. ¹⁷In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. ¹⁸But the one who had

received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

¹⁹After a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰Then 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.'

²¹His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy servant; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.'

²²And 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.' ²³His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy servant; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.'

²⁴Then 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; ²⁵so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.'

²⁶But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy servant! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? ²⁷Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents.'

²⁹For 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. ³⁰As for this worthless servant, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

In 1860, the year Abraham Lincoln was elected President, a twenty-three-year-old named Milton Bradley invented his first board game, of sixty-four red and ivory squares called the *Checkered Game of Life*. Play started on a square labelled Infancy -illustrated by a tiny wicker cradle - and ended, usually but not always, at Happy Old Age. “The game represented, as indicated by the name, the checkered journey of life,” Bradley explained. There are good patches, and bad, in roughly equal number. On the one hand: Honesty, Bravery, Success. On the other: Poverty, Idleness, Disgrace. With a spin of the dial that tells how many steps to take forward, the game requires each player to take risks and to make decisions. Most players try to go to college, heading slowly toward happiness and success.

However, by chance you could land on a square of a seedy-looking tavern with Death hovering at the door looking like a bill collector in a stove pipe hat. Curiously, in the original game, two directions that almost guarantee that you will lose are going to prison or going into politics. The wise players will strive “to gain that which will make them the most prosperous, and to shun that which will delay progress.”

A hundred years later, in 1960, the Milton Bradley Company released a commemorative *Game of Life*, which bears little resemblance to the first. Bradley’s original game about vice, virtue and the pursuit of happiness was reinvented as a lesson in consumerism. The box is filled with seven million dollars of fake money, automobile insurance and stock certificates. Players fill tiny plastic station wagons with tinier mommies and daddies and pink and blue babies in a game that is relentlessly cash conscious. In the 1960 game whoever finishes with the most money wins.

The 1970’s, 80’s and 90’s versions took the risk of death out of the game, and people ended up either “Bankrupt,” or “Retiring in Style.” However, the more recent versions go back to rewarding virtue; players earn extra cash for doing good things like recycling or donating a kidney. (Yes, those are equal options!) Finally, the latest version of the

Game of Life adds pet ownership as a high quality. Earning money is still a big part of the equation, but the new game's selling point is there is no clear goal. You mostly choose the life you want to lead. You get the same number of points on your Visa Card for taking up scuba diving or earning a PhD.¹

You could argue that in a telling way, *The Game of Life* traces an interesting arc in how we measure success from – Leading a life of Virtue toward a good old age or having it your way with plenty of cash in the bank and a pet! But this study of the history of the game shows that from 1860 until now, what the Common Denominator in each version of the game is risk and choice. You can make choices along the way – whether they be related to vice or virtue, cars or cash, children or pets – but each version involves risk. You spin the dial and move forward a few spaces and make choices depending on where you land. The choices that involve risk, that lean into uncertainty with hope for a good outcome will increase the likelihood of winning the game.

When Jesus tells the Parable of the Talents, he is on his way to Jerusalem; on his way to the end of his life, and he is trying to prepare the disciples for life without him. Their journey forward is no game, exactly, but this story of the doling out of talents seems as wildly hyperbolic and random as spinning the wheel and counting the steps forward. For the disciples, the risk is clearly the uncertainty about what lies ahead, especially when Jesus is no longer right beside them. But he has already bequeathed them much. He has shown them a greater sense of justice. He has modeled being good toward people, especially the most vulnerable. He has demonstrated how to make peace in a hostile world, and how to nurture and care for another's soul. This story Jesus tells is intended to help them imagine putting their lives at risk for the sake of the gospel in order to live meaningful, faithful, purposeful lives. Now, in order to dive into this parable deeply and surface with a nugget

¹ Jill Lepore, *The Meaning of life*, *The Yorker*, 5/15/05 and more recent history from Wikipedia.com.

of truth, we have to understand some basics. Just like last week's Parable of the Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids, this one points toward a day of Judgment. It is meant to make us mindful that God cares about how we invest our lives – our time, treasure, talent, and commitments. In the face of fear and uncertainty God also leads us forward calling us to considerable risk to further the Gospel, to spread the good news of God in the world.

Jesus captures the depth and breadth of that risk by using the oversized metaphor of a man doling out talents to his servants. A talent in this parable is not proficiency in math or music or sport or flower arranging. A talent here is a very large sum of money. One talent is worth what a day laborer could earn in about 15 years of working. The man is going on a trip. He leaves each of three servants a vast sum of money, "each according to their ability," we are told. There is a long delay before he returns, and when he does, those who received the larger portion made wise investments, doubled their sums and are praised. But the one talent person was fearful of the donor and careful not to risk losing any of it. So, he hid the cash box in the back yard and returned to the man exactly what he had been given, no less and no more. What he receives in return is a withering tongue lashing and the threat of being cast into outer darkness.

So, what exactly is the difference in how these three servants made their investments? The only real difference has to do with the gifts they were given and the risk they were willing to make. We can reasonably argue that the two who invested wisely think their absentee head of the household means well for them, perhaps like God who is benevolent, gracious, positive, and kind. While the one talent person who invests nothing imagines the returning donor with fear: "I knew that you were harsh", he says, "so I was afraid." One biblical scholar describes him saying: "This one – who risks nothing personifies the question of whether we live out of fear or we live out of hope."²

² Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone: Part 2*, p. 137.

The parable asks us – right now – are we investing in fear? Or are we investing in hope? Earlier this year, my alma mater, Davidson College, inaugurated a new President. Doug Hicks has advanced degrees in both religion and economics, and he makes the case that both religion and economics are disciplines of hope. In his inaugural address he said, “Hope isn’t the same thing as optimism. Optimism is seeing the world as better than it is. Hope sees the world exactly as it is, with its smooth parts and its rough parts, and yet hope envisions a better reality... hope is active, something that requires a great deal of work, and a healthy dose of courage in the face of what we see today.”

And then Doug Hicks points to the differentiation Martin Luther King, Jr., made between what he called *magic hope* and *realistic hope*. Magic hope, King argued, involves sitting around and waiting for something to miraculously change. It gets us nowhere. Realistic hope, on the other hand, requires much from us: critical thinking skills, social analysis, organizational prowess, motivational power, and moral imagination. Those are the real components of hope.

Hicks takes what King said and frames it in his own words as a new college president overseeing the education of young adults – which we know is a risky endeavor on college campuses these days. He says: “Hope is more than a virtue. Hope is a practice. An active, daily practice, a way of being in the world. We exercise our critical thinking skills to analyze and understand the world. We exercise our moral imagination to envision something better, and to believe that no problem is too big or intractable to solve. Then, we exercise our courageous resilience and get to work.”³

I think that is exactly what Jesus was getting after when he tells this parable about Wise Investing. Do not be afraid of the giver. Your primary Benefactor is neither harsh nor to be feared. God has given you everything you need to journey through life as a faithful disciple of

³ Douglas Hicks, Inaugural Address, Davidson College, 3/31/23.

Christ. Put what God has given you - into the daily, active practice of hope. Use your critical thinking skills. Use your moral imagination. Exercise courageous resilience and get to work. And you will – no doubt – discover you have made Wise Investments in life. Not the Game of Life, but your authentic, meaningful, productive God-given life.

AMEN.