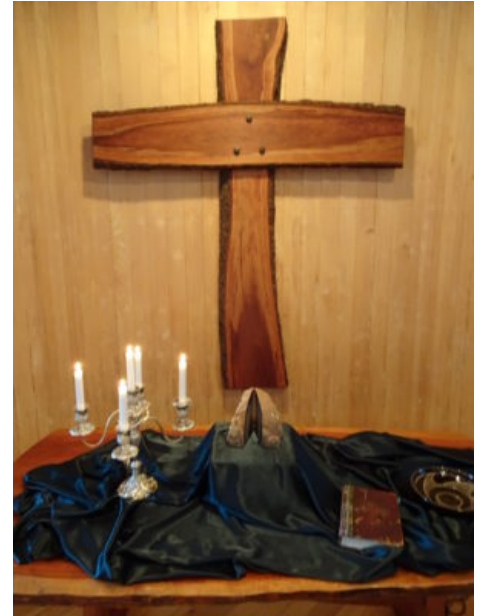


# “Investing in Community” by Marjory Zoet Bankson

November 19, 2017



## Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Text: Matthew 25: 14-30 the Parable of the Talents

A strange picture of God has emerged from the gospel texts in the past several weeks. At a wedding feast, the “master” expels a guest who isn’t wearing the right clothes. Last week, five foolish virgins are locked out of the wedding festivities because they hadn’t planned well. And this week, a fearful man with only one talent is cast into “utter darkness where there is wailing and gnashing of teeth.” On the surface, each of these stories picture God as harsh and unforgiving – an arbitrary and judgmental master.

That image is just the opposite of the compassionate God that Jesus has been preaching about earlier in Matthew. If we take this particular parable literally, the poorest man fares very badly. And in some Christian circles, this parable has been used to justify prosperity-gospel thinking: that the rich

deserve to get richer and the poor should literally be punished.

But parables are – well – parabolic. Because the surface of a parabolic lens is curved, the point of view is directed somewhere else. It's not a straight reflection, so we will need to look past the obvious.

If we look at this particular parable in the context of Matthew's larger narrative, we see that it is followed by a strong conclusion that we will be hearing next week – that God is experienced by those who respond to need even when they do not recognize Jesus: “for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink...” And when the righteous say in surprise, “Lord, when did we see you hungry?” The master replies, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to the least of these, you did it unto me.” The arc of Matthew's gospel bends toward justice and mercy, not judgment and condemnation of the poor.

In that context, the parabolic story of the master who goes away, leaving his servants with 10, 5 and 1 talent, probably has a different meaning from what we see on the surface. I suspect that this story is not about investing money for maximum interest, but about something else entirely – so let's start with the one-talent man.

**The one-talent man** is afraid that he doesn't have enough to share with others. He feels poor and scared and helpless. He's caught too by his aloneness. He seems isolated and terrified, while the other two recipients immediately engage others in a way that expands their gifts of five and ten talents.

Have you ever felt like that one-talent man? Anxious that you can't measure up to the expectations of others? Afraid to be generous because you might not have enough?

**A talent**, according to my Bible dictionary, was worth about three-months wages. And if I were handed a talent, knowing

that the owner could ask for it at any time, I would be tempted to put it in a safe place too. I would NOT give it to the next needy person that I met, nor would I invest it – or buy a 5-year cd to get the best rate of return. Like the 1-talent man, I would probably put it in a safe place, hoping that it would not be stolen or misplaced before the master returns.

**When we first came to Seekers**, back in 1976, I was a mid-level potter – with little income to show for my hard work because we had just moved here. I had just joined a cooperative studio with four other potters at the Torpedo Factory, where I worked one day a week and every fifth weekend, selling our wares and talking with people. The rest of the time I worked at home, alone, in our basement. My income barely covered expenses.

Peter and I gave to Seekers from “our” money and I buried my net income in the ground – by ordering another ton of clay and more glaze components, to broaden my color range.

**Seekers was just getting started then.** By the end of the first year, there were 15 “stewards” and about 35 adult members – about the same size as we are now. Those stewards had been schooled by Church of the Saviour to tithe their time and their money.

Emily Gilbert, who was my sponsor into stewardship, spotted my tendency to hoard “my money,” and, as part of my preparation for becoming a “steward,” she gave me one dollar – with the direction to spend it on myself. I honestly couldn’t find anything that I really wanted for myself, so I bought a small wooden Christmas ornament at the cathedral – which we still hang on the tree every year as a reminder of this embarrassing struggle.

I think Emily recognized how tightly I was hanging on to “my” money as a way to confirm my worth as a woman who was trying

to become a professional potter. In response to Emily, I began a secret discipline – of giving \$5/week out of my little money stash, to see whether I could relax my fears a bit. You may smile at the smallness of my effort, but it felt big to me. I recommend this as a discipline!

As I began to give regularly to Seekers, I noticed something else – that I became more interested in what Seekers did with “our” money. I felt more connected with the values and direction of the community. It gave me a reason to care about the balance of community life expenses and outreach giving. Frankly, I think this is the point of Matthew’s parable of the talents: **those who invested their talents reaped the rewards of shared interest and engagement!**

**I don’t think this parable is about maximizing interest.** It’s probably not about money at all. As Glenn said about the wise and foolish virgin’s story last week, I’m guessing that the talents in this story represent energy, life-force, gifts and talents that we have been given for the work of love – for feeding the hungry, clothing the naked and empowering the powerless. The two servants who invested the talents they had been given did multiply those gifts, because they joined with others.

That’s something we can do here at Seekers: combine our individual talents to make a significant impact with our money where someone from our community is also investing their time and energy.

**Today**, our collective income is nearly ten times what it was in 1976. Next year, we anticipate around \$230,000 in contributions and about \$40,000 from outside users of our building. [represented by this cylinder of glass marbles]

Our expenses are divided into three categories.

- We anticipate spending \$50,000 on the building and putting \$5,000 into the capital reserve fund – in case

the roof blows off or the air-conditioning needs to be replaced. That's 20% of our expenses. [pour 20% into smaller container]

You know that we talk about this building as a "Ministry of Place," but did you have any idea that, in 2017, we will have had **821 non-Seekers events** in this space? Which will bring in an estimated \$41,700 this year?

That means that others who use this space will be carrying **80% of the costs!** We owe Katie Fisher, our building manager, and the Time & Space Mission Group, a "shout out" for being such good stewards of this space on our behalf! You will find a complete list of non-Seeker building occupants on the back-hall bulletin board, by the kitchen.

- The second category is "community life," which takes about 30% of our income. [pour marbles into another smaller container]. That is money spent on our life together.

Community life covers stipends (not salaries or health care) for the Servant Leadership Team, the building manager and a small stipend for our treasurer. It also covers mission group expenditures, plus money for youth activities and the art gallery. In my mind, much of what the Servant Leadership Team does could be considered "outreach" as well as community life, because they see to the health and balance for this body of Christ. And mission group expenditures are often about outreach too. But for now, I'll leave that category as "for ourselves."

- The third and largest category is "outreach," at 51% of our income. In other words, we give HALF of our contributed income to organizations where someone from Seekers is already giving their time and energy. This is planned giving, and does not include special offerings like the hurricane relief offering which we are

collecting today – or the Christmas offering which we will collect during Advent.

The remarkable thing about our outreach giving is that we depend upon members of Seekers to be involved in ministries that feel like call, and to become advocates for the work they are doing.

Each year, after stewards have decided on a bulk amount for outreach in the budget, there is an open process in January and February for YOU to request funds from domestic or international giving. Then, on a given Sunday after worship, any person – whether they are long-term or one-time visitors – may sit in on the discussion and bargaining session to determine where our domestic or international funds will be spent.

When we consider how and where our collective funds are given, we depend upon members of this congregation who are called to those ministries – to collect yearly reports, and watch for caring policies and good management. We don't want to bury or squander our collective treasure! This is not charity. It's a way to invest in changing attitudes and practices near and far.

You may be surprised to know where your money has gone this year. I am simply going to read the list of recipients of 2017 funds for domestic and international giving, without including any details. As I read the list, **would you stand and remain standing if you are involved in that ministry?**

### **Domestic Outreach**

**CoS Related:** Christ House, Dayspring Overlook, Discipleship Year, and the Potter's House.

**Advocacy:** Center for Medicare Advocacy, and WORDE [World Organization for Resource Deveopment and Education].

**Education:** First Book, FLOC, InterPlay, Luce Center for Arts & Religion, and Street Sense.

**Housing:** Silver Spring Senior Village, Joseph's House, L/Arche, Manna, N St Village, and Sarah's Circle.

**Other:** Arlington THRIVE, Common Ground on the Border, Conflict Resolution Center, and the Muslim Women's Coalition. [notice who's standing and invite them to sit down]

### **International Outreach**

**Haiti** (Soil), **Guatemala** (PAVA, reforestation & Asturias Academy), **Israel & Palestine** (New Story Leadership), **Russia** and **Eastern Europe** (the Rostropovich Foundation), and **South Africa** (Bokamoso & Othandweni). [notice who's standing and invite them to sit down]

**Seekers Outreach:** Care Packs & Covenant Thanksgiving Baskets; the Growing Edge Fund & the Holy Spirit Fund. [stand – and sit down]

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**In the parable of the talents**, the 5-talent person and the 10-talent person both invested what the master had given them. They saw the power in pooling their money, their talents and their energy – and they were rewarded for that.

I suspect that the meaning of this parable lies in the contrast between their collective efforts and the isolation and fear of the one-talent man. The parable of the talents is really a story about the value of community and pooled resources, not about the harsh master or the fearful servant.

It's about learning that we can let go of the cultural norm that you must live out of fear and scarcity, protect what you have and see life as a struggle for survival. This parable is set in the larger context of responding to genuine need, and expecting all who are able to share in working for the common

good. Read ahead in Matthew 25 to see the point of this teaching: I was hungry, and you gave me food. I was thirsty, and you gave me drink.”

Too often, as Americans, we’ve been guilty of throwing money at problems: feeding the naked and clothing the hungry, because we didn’t take the time to know the organizations or the real needs of people who were involved. Now is the time for discernment, for listening to the real needs of people who are suffering and not getting caught up in the latest fears which keep us hobbled, which encourage us to bury our treasure in the ground.

Our theme for this season is “Finding Treasure in Darkness.” I do think there are times when all of us feel lost and alone. When we feel totally isolate and don’t see the value in sharing what little we have – when we seem to be lost in the dark.

And yet life in this community continues to remind us that in the end, love wins. God is not so much a harsh master who demands payment with interest BUT a powerful force for good through our use of time, and money, energy and human compassion. That’s the story-arc in Matthew and in our own lives too.

We have each been given many talents to use with care and consciousness. Giving through Seekers is one way to do that. Let us be about that good work while we live in this world.

May God bless this reading of the word.

Amen.