

Dividends

“Make it an adventure.”

Matthew 25:14-21

God's Thinkers and Tinkers: taking care of God's stuff #8

Rev. John H. Hice

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First United Methodist Church of Royal Oak, Michigan

Which God?

I was all signed up for a class with a tough professor, and was a little unnerved. He was reputed to be a difficult grader, have resolute opinions, and be difficult to follow in lecture.

I was talking with a friend who was a Ph.D. student studying with him and he told me not to worry. He said that you just have to know how to follow him. Then he also advised that this professor had very strong opinions, some of which were controversial. He told me not to worry about that. “Engage him in the classroom and he’ll engage you right back, but that won’t mean he doesn’t like to debate. While everyone else is trying to be his carbon copy in order to get a good grade they won’t do so well because of their caution. Just engage him. Think your thesis through. Be clear and be resolute, and not only will you come to enjoy him, but he will enjoy you.”

Could it be that this professor was dealing with his students like God wants to relate to us? Engaging and freeing, encouraging you and me to figure things out, take risks in life to make things better, and even influence God along the way?

Direction of Discipleship

Here’s the *Parable of the Talents*. It’s probably one of the better known stories in the Bible, maybe because preachers can’t stop using it during stewardship time. Yet, though it has a lot to do with money, it’s a story that has a lot more to do with our faith and the way we live out our belief in God. In fact, it might even suggest a choice we have about *which* God we are going serve.

Jesus talks about three servants who are given huge sums of money to manage while their master is away. The talent he is speaking of is not some natural ability to do something, like someone who can play the piano or is a natural on the ball field. This talent is an actual, huge sum of money –the amount that a day laborer would earn over the course of 15 years of work.¹ Each talent would be worth about \$340,000 in today’s

U.S. currency.² So, he gives \$1.7 million to one servant, \$680,000 to the second one, and \$340,000 to the third.

Two of them take the money and invest, they risk, and since the market is healthy, they double their take. When the master returns, the first one has \$3.4 million, and so on. But the third one is like the students who were intimidated by my professor. *Afraid to risk* because he thinks the master is cruel and demanding and would judge harshly if there's a loss. So he holds back, buries the talent and has nothing to show for the master's trust. So the master blows his top, takes back even what he had given and condemns him the very way the servant has feared. So what do you think? IS God like the master as he relates to the adventurers – freeing and empowering to make a difference – or as he relates to the cautious one – demanding and condemning if there is no gain?³

It's like Jesus is saying that you have a choice about the God you follow. Does your God turn you loose or hold you back?

What do you think? We live in a time when it seems everything tells us to be cautious. Friends in another long-established church in Royal Oak are right now being absorbed by a newer and younger congregation as they come to grips that on their own, their church is in demise. The other night Our District Superintendent told me that there are churches on our district that already had their heat and lights turned off; and even after receiving thousands of dollars of help, they are in such a deep financial crisis they are likely to close soon. Our own church is facing enormous financial strains. All this has been brought on by our economy's current failure; but it's also something that's been sneaking up on us for a long time.

In the face of that, we have to answer the same question that Jesus posed – both personally and as a congregation. Will we serve an exacting and harsh God and be filled with anxiety and move with caution? Or will we see this as a time of possibility: a reason to redouble our resolve to make a difference in our community and in our world? Will we hold back or will we go for broke?

Anxiety? Or Adventure?

This is the God

Josh Wright, our Staff Volunteer Coordinator, is a Masters Degree student in history at Wayne State. During the summer he studied First Methodist Episcopal of Royal Oak during the Great Depression. This, he says, is how our forebears fared before us.

Between 1928 and 1934 our offering dropped by over 50%. Yet, we must have kept on with a passionate ministry. We made do by renting out a house we owned and hiring out our telephone; we borrowed from our building fund; and our Ladies' Aid Society raised money to keep our building debts current and our capital needs paid. Between 1928 and 1938, when we were hit so hard by the financial crisis of the Depression, we grew by over 400 members.⁴

We invested our time and efforts, our prayers and ingenuity, and faith in the mission God gave us. We chose *adventure, not anxiety*.

We served a generous and adventuresome God.

While some would cower, afraid to write a paper my professor might disagree with, I took my friend's advice and engaged. I probably lost every debate I had with him in class and in his office. I think that he might have disagreed with the thesis in my term paper. But he gave me an A; and I think it was because I was doing what he was trying to get across in his class: I was thinking and tinkering with the concepts – the kind of scholarship the professor wanted to produce.

You are God's thinker and tinker (and I hope not a stinker!). Into your hands as well as mine God has given people who need a lot of love. In these hands we hold our church; in them we hold, also, our society and the very world in which we live. All of this that God had made and entrusted: so wondrous and so beautiful. May we care for them well. May we take up the adventure, follow in the steps of Jesus, and in our caring give them everything we've got.

¹ M. Eugene Boring, "The Gospel of Matthew," The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, vol. VIII. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press © 1995. p 453.

² I used the 2009 minimum wage of \$7.25/hr. @ 10 hours/day, six days/week, 52 weeks/year and rounded it off.

³ Boring, op. cit., p 453.

⁴ Joshua L. Wright, *No Depression in Heaven?* – "The impact of and reaction to the Great Depression in a Protestant congregation in Suburban Detroit." August 26, 2009.