



“THE FARMER’S RISK”

Matthew 25:14-30

Rev. Elbert Paul Dulworth

First United Methodist Church
Birmingham, Michigan

On Monday this past week, Sears announced that its CEO was stepping down as the company filed for bankruptcy. As the company restructures, 142 Sears and Kmart stores will be closed by the end of the year.¹ Many of us today remember the large department stores that served as anchors within several malls in our area. Previous generations, however, remember the retail giant whose catalog once brought items into their homes that weren’t always available in local stores.

Well before the last catalog was published in 1993,² families looked forward to the regular arrival of their Sears catalog, complete with the latest fashions, trends, appliances, tools, and more. Some might argue that it was the catalog that made Sears famous throughout the years.

This past week, however, as I found myself in Rochester, New York, in the land of Susan B. Anthony, women’s suffrage, Frederick Douglas, the abolitionist movement, George Eastman and Eastman Kodak who put a camera in the hands of average people, I found myself reading about one of the greater impacts that the famous Sears catalog—with all of its items, pictures, and prices—had on our society at large. Mary Schmich of *The Chicago Tribune* wrote an article after following some tweets by Louis Hyman, a historian of capitalism at Cornell University, who spoke about how revolutionary the catalog was in its day.³

Schmich contacted Hyman and heard him tell how “radical” the Sears catalog was in the era of Jim Crow. In many places in the country, families had to make their purchases at local general stores. In several communities, African-Americans were treated differently than Caucasian clientele. They might have to wait longer for customer service. Their orders were not top priorities. At times, they were even charged different prices by shopkeepers. The Sears catalog, however, enabled African-American families to “buy without asking permission. Without waiting. Without being watched. With national (cheap) prices.”⁴ They were able to pay what everyone else paid without anyone treating them any differently in the process. While this may not have been the original purpose of the catalog division, it was a transforming and welcome result for our society.

So what happened to the company whose catalog once caused the world to be a different place? Some have suggested that Sears, and others like it, couldn’t keep pace with online retailers

like Amazon. In 1993, when the last catalog was published, I was graduating from high school and going on to college. While email was beginning to take hold at that time, online catalogs were not thriving just yet. On the other hand, when online ordering did begin to pick up pace in later years, it's surprising that the company whose business for so many years thrived on catalog orders struggled to adapt and to catch up quickly enough before it was edged out of that marketplace. What was the missed investment or marketing adaptation for Sears, who once revolutionized the world in intended and unintended ways?

I wonder if our scripture lesson from Matthew's gospel leaves us scratching our heads about our investments as the body of Christ in similar ways this morning. In the famous *Parable of the Talents*, Jesus tells the story of a man (a remarkably wealthy man) who goes on a journey and entrusts portions of his estate to three of his servants. He gives one man five talents, another two, and another one.

For perspective, you should know that a talent was worth fifteen years of wages.⁵ This gives you a little idea of how wealthy this man is. So he entrusts to one of his servants the equivalent of 75 years' worth of wages. That's more than an average lifetime of income at the time. He entrusts another with 30 years' worth of wages, or an average lifetime of income, and a third with 15 years' worth of wages.

While the master, or property owner, is gone, the first two, who had the most to lose, trade the money and invest it; each doubling their money.

The third, however, digs a hole and buries it. In a day without safes, it seems a logical thing to do, doesn't it? That's quite a bit of money. When you hear the story, you can't blame him for not wanting to lose what was entrusted to him, can you? He doesn't make that kind of money. If he lost it, he'd never be able to recover it in time for the master. You can almost agree with this servant about how incensed the master might be if he had to tell him that he no longer had the money upon his arrival back home.

When the property owner returns, the first two servants, who doubled their money, are rewarded. The third one, however, doesn't even receive a commendation for keeping the money safe. Instead, he receives a horrible punishment. When we think of stewardship, we almost empathize with the third servant, don't we? I think perhaps even Jesus' original hearers might have empathized with this third servant. It sounded like the right thing to do to keep the money safe. To be sure, he could have put it in a bank, but even still, with interest rates being what they are and no federal insurance to protect it, who knows what might have happened to the money.

On the other hand, if we are only paying attention to what each servant did with their talents, are we missing important points in the parable? Remember, parables are often layered with meanings.

The first two servants, when entrusted with their talents, went and invested them. They took a risk. Yes, they risked the possibility of losing the talents. Their risk, however, was rewarded in the long run by the master. When we view the property owner in this lens, the owner is exceedingly generous with each of these servants. He has entrusted common servants with quite

a lot of his holdings even though it has been downplayed as only a “few things.” Having been found faithful, they will now be in charge of many more. They are invited to enter into the joy of the property owner. Could it be that they trusted the master’s generosity all along and that’s what moved them to risk the investment?

The last servant, however, told the master that he knew how harsh of a man he was, reaping where he did not sow, and gathering where he did not scatter seed. Fear of the master kept the servant from investing any of what was entrusted to him. He clearly did not see the property owner as being generous, but rather, ruthless in his dealings with others. In the end, he was judged by the same ruthlessness that he feared. Fear kept him from incurring any sort of risk. In the end, he received what he feared the most. His fear kept him from being fruitful and from experiencing generosity.

I’m not an economist, so I couldn’t begin to describe whether fears of the unknown kept Sears from investing in an online catalog in the early days of the internet when Jeff Bezos invested in Amazon in 1994. It wasn’t long, though, before it became too difficult to compete in the same world that was beginning to take a huge stake in the online market. Doesn’t it seem like just yesterday we were still shopping in catalogs and stores?

As I think of our scripture this morning, however, I wonder if fear does not at times drive us as Christians when it comes to how we approach generosity, giving, stewardship, and finances. When we hear the parable, it certainly seems as if the last servant was a good steward, or caretaker, of what was entrusted to him, does it not? He protected 15 years’ worth of wage for the property owner. Buried in the ground where only he knew about it, the investment wasn’t lost. Yet, it never did anything, did it? The property owner trusted him with the talent for a reason. He must have seen something within each of the servants to trust that they could use and keep the resources in wise ways. Rather than seeing the trust of the master, he lived in fear of him; a fear by which he was judged in the end.

The other two experienced the trust of the master as well as the generosity of the master. Knowing the value of what had been entrusted to them, they risked it to do more for the one who had entrusted them with his property in the first place.

We often talk about stewardship as caring for that which was entrusted to us. Surely there is a component of fiscal responsibility attached to our conception of stewardship. I wouldn’t argue that God wants us to gamble away what has been entrusted to our care. Yet, I wonder if all too often we hold faithful stewardship as being more important than God’s invitation to live generously in our lives. Do we let our fears as stewards keep us from the risks of living generously? Does our fear of losing it all and not being able to cover the cost cause us to miss how much has been given into our care?

The reality was the same for each of the servants. The first two had no guarantees that their talents would double. We’re not told that they squandered or gambled the talents away. Rather, they took what was entrusted to their care and they doubled it. Somehow, they risked the investment, which seemed more important than hiding it in a coffee can in the ground.

Over the last several weeks, we've been talking about the many people who risked investing in who we are today over these past 21 years at Birmingham First. They didn't see what type of fruit we would bear. Trusting in God, they put forward their gifts that have helped us to grow to have strong mission programs, excellent children, youth and family ministries, and powerful worship experiences. They planted generously over these years for a harvest that they would not fully see. Yet, they filled out their commitment cards trusting that the risk would be worth the harvest that we now experience. When I look around here as your senior pastor, I can see the benefits of their investments, of your investments over these past 21 years.

As I look ahead to the next 21 years, I can't tell you entirely what we'll look like that many years from now. What I do know is this. For almost 200 years, you have been example of a community of faith that knows how to be the Church, the body of Christ. You know what it means to reach out and make a difference in the lives of people and in the world. You know how to plant seeds of faith, hope, and love in this community and throughout the world. And you see the harvest of almost 200 years' worth of work. You have been there when people needed you most.

We continue to harvest so much here from what others have planted before us. I'm convinced that God has great harvests still to come for us. While others remain uncertain about what the future holds for United Methodists, we are clear about the One who holds our future at Birmingham and Berkley First. We are clear that God has graced our lives with a generous love that calls us to live with the same degree of generosity. We are clear that we serve a God who risked death to invite us to embrace life without fear. We cast our fears aside to proclaim a God of abundant grace whenever we decide to plant with the same generosity that has first touched our lives.

This week, as you receive your commitment cards in the mail in your homes, I hope that you'll take a few moments to consider your budgets, to pray with others around you, and to think about how God might be inviting you to invest generously in future harvests at Birmingham and Berkley First. I pray that God will move us beyond our fears of what might happen in the next year or two and instead call us to think about what could be possible as we plant seeds today that generations to follow will harvest ahead of us.

This week, as I toured the Susan B. Anthony house in Rochester, New York, I stood in the bedroom next to the bed where she died advocating for the right of women to vote. I heard the docent tell us that following a gathering in Washington, D.C., she had developed pneumonia, which was not as treatable as it is today. She had gone to D.C. knowing that she'd never see women granted the right to vote in her lifetime, but that she wanted to inspire younger women take up the cause so that it would happen. The nineteenth amendment granting women the right to vote was ratified 14 years after she died. It was a powerful moment for me to stand in that place and hear her words that "Failure is impossible" and to listen to her story reframed for me.

Perhaps we are in a similar place in our nation and in our church around a variety of topics. We don't know how long it will take us to see the transformation that God intends for us and for the world around us. Together, however, God has given us what we need when we boldly plant those seeds of faith, hope, and love into the lives of our children, our communities, our world, and one

another. The transformation we long to see lies in what we do with what we have today. “How much shall I plant? How much shall we plant?” we might ask one another.

How much will make a difference? What might our future look like as we invest in the place that has meant so much in our lives and in our faith journeys? Why wouldn’t we want others to experience the joy, the peace, the hope, and the love we have come to experience in this place? How might what we plant reflect the generosity of our God who brings about the harvest in our lives? If this is the case, then what do we have to fear when we remember the promise, “You will always harvest what you plant”?

¹ <https://www.cnn.com/2018/10/15/sears-files-for-bankruptcy.html>

² <http://www.searsarchives.com/catalogs/questions/catalogend.htm>

³ <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/columnists/schmich/ct-met-sears-catalogue-mary-schmich-20181016-story.html>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Boring, M. Eugene. *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. viii. Ed. Leander E. Keck, et al. (Nashville: Abingdon P, 1995), 453.