

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
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I. Opportunity Cost

Once upon a time there was a man of God whose name was Abram. Abram spent his whole life making choices that reflected his confidence in the promises of God. Abram enjoyed the fruits of these choices and he grew very wealthy. But Abram thought God had promised him children and now Abram, who was getting on in years, was beginning to wonder whether he had heard God correctly.

This is where our first reading picks up today. God comes to Abram in a vision. God says to Abram, Do not be afraid! Abram laments that an employee will inherit his estate. Abram is concerned about the opportunity cost of following God: Abram has received many good things but he has not yet achieved what he wants most: an heir.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus is speaking not to one man but to a large crowd, multiple thousands, about the same economic concept: opportunity cost. Opportunity cost is about making hard choices with limited resources. It's about the road not taken, choosing one investment over another.

Jesus is surrounded by people all bringing their own worries and anxieties, and most of them are talking about money. There are so many risks to be managed! There are robbers, embezzlers, and custodial fees. There are bankruptcies, defaults, and market swings. There are inflation, devaluation, and natural disasters. And there are, inevitably, taxes.

Like God speaking to Abram, Jesus tells his listeners, Do not be afraid! Jesus points to a different investment opportunity. He asks his listeners, "Have you considered investing in the kingdom of God? Have you added up the opportunity cost of *not* doing so?"

II. Prospectus: the Kingdom of God

We try to be wise investors. So how about a prospectus on the Kingdom of God?

That prospectus would need to answer four questions:

- What is the kingdom of God?
- Why and how would you invest in it?
- What are the risks?
- And what are the promised returns?

What is the kingdom of God?

The kingdom of God is the experience of God's reign in the world. Life in God's kingdom is life that transcends the concerns of popular culture, politics, and the 24-hour news cycle. It is a life that instead is rooted in solid, eternal truths of dignity, compassion, hope, and love. The kingdom of God is what Abram knew as the promise of God.

How do you invest in God's kingdom? Jesus declares that where your treasure is, there your heart is also. What do you truly treasure? Where is your heart, your concern, your passion? What matters to you and how do you spend your time? You have the option to invest in God's kingdom with every heartbeat: with every thought, word, and action.

I see people investing in God's kingdom all the time around Epiphany. It is God's kingdom we seek to enact as we gather to celebrate Holy Eucharist. It is God's kingdom I encounter as I meet various people in this parish, all engaged in ministry, finding the kingdom of God within yourselves and sharing it with others. You share it in celebrations, in desserts, and in small groups. You share it in cards, in quiet words of gratitude, and in the ministry of the Eucharistic Visitors. You share it as ushers and organizers and singers.

[[It's God's kingdom I see as I meet the staff, volunteers, and participants in Kids4Peace, some of whom are with us today. These are the brave souls who refuse to place their hearts in the hands of cynics and bigots and warmongers. They also refuse to leave their hearts in the hands of their hurting friends and family members who have been brutalized by oppression and terrorism. Instead they place their hearts in the hands of a loving God and in the possibility of

peaceful coexistence. The Jerusalem students in particular know about opportunity cost, risk, and the real, physical danger in which they place themselves by their participation in Kids4Peace. They are not afraid. Because for them, the returns outweigh the risks.]]

What are risks that pertain to investing in the kingdom of God? Those the Bible makes clear: The first will be last. We turn the other cheek. We love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. We leave vengeance to God. Like Abram, we wait on God's time, not our own. We also do practical, everyday things like spending hours in Seattle traffic, driving 72 miles in an afternoon to deliver flowers that express our love and solidarity with someone who is hurting or lonely. (Well maybe that's not so terribly practical, but we do it anyway!) Because that's what you do when you invest heartbeats in the kingdom of God.

And we do these things because the returns on our investment are beyond compare. Investment in the kingdom of God means participation in the deepest reality of Creation, a reality that transcends the social, cultural, and political constructs we have overlaid on top of it. Investment in the kingdom of God means being defined, finding my identity and my value, not in any of the transitory goods of this world or in the opinions of men, but in God alone. It is an utterly secure investment, completely immune to market forces, unshakable.

III. How to Invest: Jesus' Advice

In today's Gospel, the people are asking Jesus, What does investing in the kingdom of God look like in the economic sphere? Jesus responds, Do not be afraid! (You know you're in trouble now. Whenever God says, Do not be afraid, it's a dead giveaway that there are some big changes coming to your life.) Jesus says, Do not be afraid! Sell your possessions and give to the poor.

Left on its own, Jesus' statement sounds kind of scary. It makes *me* afraid! And I don't want to minimize it or rationalize it away. "It's not as if he were a tame lion." But I do want to put Jesus' advice into some context.

What Jesus is suggesting to his listeners, the advice he's giving them, is to practice one of the many spiritual disciplines handed down to us by our Jewish forebears, the discipline of giving.

It was several years ago that I went to college at Virginia Tech. During that time, as I began to embrace my faith, one of the most important, transformative books I read was Richard Foster's *Celebration of Discipline*. It is a practical handbook on the how's and why's of practicing 12 core spiritual disciplines ranging from worship to simplicity to submission.

The purpose of a spiritual discipline is to help re-orient a believer's life, to help *your* life be defined *more* by the kingdom of God and *less* by anything else. Foster's book *transformed* my life by teaching me practical skills for investing in God's kingdom.

The discipline of *giving* is designed to help you *dis-entangle* your identity from wealth and possessions and to help you *live into* your *true* identity as a child of God. The discipline of *giving* helps us to discern whether we own our wealth and use it to nurture our connection to the kingdom of God and to one another, or whether *it* owns us and keeps us anchored to a lesser, more isolated kingdom. The discipline of *giving* invites us to divest ourselves of whatever it is that binds us to a smaller reality and to invest our *whole hearts* in the kingdom of God.

IV. Conclusion

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus isn't making a threat. He's not making a demand or issuing a new law. Do not be afraid!

Giving is not about bribing God, changing God's mind, or gaining God's approval. *Giving* is about making the most important thing the most important thing, even in our checkbook.

God's kingdom isn't far off and unattainable. The kingdom of God is near! God isn't hiding it from you. God isn't looking for an excuse to keep you out: God is systematically *removing every barrier* that might hinder you. And *Giving* is one of God's tools in that holy work.

Abram was wealthy: but rather than being defined by his wealth and the power of his estate, Abram wasn't afraid to invest *his* identity in the promise of God. And that promise, a promise of heirs as numerous as the stars in the sky, looked pretty unlikely at the time. Today over half the world, more than four billion of us, claim Abraham as our father as we practice a faith passed down from him. It sounds to me like Abram's investment is starting to pay out.

What are the opportunity costs inherent in your current portfolio of heartbeat investments?

How might *giving* strengthen your identification with the kingdom of God?

Where is your treasure?

Do not be afraid!