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One of the great advantages of reading the Gospels in a three-year cycle is that it offers us a chance to see things we may have missed before.

That happened to me, again, with the Gospel passage for this Sunday. It stood out for me more than ever before that when the Master summoned his servants and entrusted his possessions to them, he gave to each according to his ability.

That's a good way to do it—much better than a one size all approach that would have required everyone to meet the same quota of return on investment.

It also takes away any excuse for non-performance, though. Each of the servants is given something that he can work with, and if he does, the Master's response is the same, regardless of the output: "Well done, my good and faithful servant. Since you were faithful in small matters, I will give you great responsibilities. Come, share your master's joy."

It's worth noting that, both in the case of the first servant and the second, the exact same wording is used. We are invited to presume that the "sharing in the Master's joy" will be complete in both cases.

So, what happened to the third servant? It seems to me that, perhaps, his image of the Master got in the way of his interest in acting on the investment

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the Master had made in him.

Although we have no other evidence in the story that the Master is a demanding person, harvesting where he did not plant and gathering where he did not scatter, that image, warranted or not, led the third servant to simply avoid losing anything of what the Master had given him.

Not much of an investment. Nothing more than the Master could have done for himself by simply going to the bank.

That makes me wonder whether fear is really what's going on. It causes me to suspect that what might really be motivating the third servant was a lack of interest in the Master's business.

It seems like the third servant simply couldn't be bothered by the responsibilities the Master had given him, but took the Master's absence as an opportunity to get involved in other pursuits.

He didn't even have the commitment to take the money to the bank and put it on deposit there!

This parable really seems to be about our investment in what the Master is about. That seems to be the telling point.

Those who are invested make use of the gifts given in a way that leads to their sharing in the Master's joy. There's no really concern about who

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produces the most, no competition among the servants, simply a very basic criterion: are they willing to be about the Master's business in his absence, or not?

This basic criterion could be thought of as a basic law of nature. We would not be angry with God if the laws of nature continued to be in effect even when it works to our disadvantage. No one curses God for the law of gravity if they drive off a cliff.

There are spiritual laws which have the same character: Joy comes to those who invest themselves in the things of God. To those who don't, they find themselves on the outside looking in.

That's just the way matters of the Spirit work. It's the way they were set up from the beginning. No need to personalize the issue and decide it must be God out to get us.

When the Spirit of God we receive already at our birth and baptism is given away, it doubles. And with the increase in God's Spirit come the consciousness of how the Spirit grows and a greater responsibility to make that happen.

The Master knows this spiritual law and tells the two servants that this happened because they have been "good and faithful." They have cooperated with the Spirit of God, and so greater

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responsibilities naturally follow.

The last servant does not discover the joy of cooperating with the gift of the Spirit. He has the mistaken idea that one talent can remain one talent if it is carefully hoarded. He tries to return it as it was given to him.

But according to the laws of the Spirit, it is a “use-it-or-lose-it” proposition. If the Spirit is given away, it increases. If it is buried, it decreases. A talent buried is not a talent saved, but a talent lost.

That’s just the way things work in the realm of the Spirit. As sure as we can count on gravity holding our feet to the floor when we get up in the morning, we can count on our response to God’s gift of his own creative Spirit of love having predictable outcomes.

There’s no fudging when it comes to this. It’s bound to happen. Those who invest themselves in the things of the Lord will share the Master’s joy. Those who don’t won’t.

Now that we have been reminded once again of how things work, we can plan to use our gifts, our talents accordingly, and, if we want, look forward to sharing the Master’s joy.