What is the way forward? This should always be the question for us. We are trying to follow a power that is far greater than our power. We are trying to follow a truth that is deeper than our truth. We are trying to follow a way of love that is not our way of love.

What is the way forward? This should always be the question for us. Sometimes we only ask the question when we are forced to ask the question. The people of the Church of the Holy Apostles in Manhattan were forced to ask the question. Their story of being forced to ask the question started about 35 years ago. Membership and attendance at Sunday services had been declining all through the 1960s and 70s. In 1980 the Bishop of New York wanted to close the building and merge the congregation with another parish, but the congregation refused. The church had 125 members, and enough income to pay for utilities and a salary for their priest, but not much else. At the same time, the homeless population in New York was climbing.

In 1982 the Church of the Holy Apostles called a new priest to serve with them. He suggested they open a soup kitchen in the parish house of the church. Within a few years the church was serving lunch to more than 900 guests every day. The parish hall of the church could not seat 900 people, so lunch was served for several hours in order to accommodate all of the people who needed a hot meal.

The work of the soup kitchen had a positive effect on the congregation. The congregation did not immediately grow in size, but they stopped losing members. They also found more strength and financial resources to begin work on long needed repairs, including replacement of the roof. The replacement of the roof was almost complete on April 9th, 1990. That day someone working high on the roof was using an acetylene torch and one of the roof beams caught on fire. The workers put out the fire with a fire extinguisher.

Actually, what happened was that the workers used a fire extinguisher and thought they had put out the fire. Somewhere, deep in the ancient wooden beam, one small ember continued to burn. The workers left for the day. No one noticed as smoke began to fill the sanctuary.

There were no smoke alarms. It was not until the flames of the burning roof began to light up the night sky that someone passing by the church noticed the fire. The fire department came. The fire was put out but not before many of the stained glass windows were broken and thousands of gallons of water were poured all over the nave and the chancel.

Then the people of the Church of the Holy Apostles were forced to ask the question, “What is the way forward?” Should they rebuild the church? Should they try to restore it exactly the way it was before the fire? Should they use the money from the fire insurance to repair and restore the pews of the church? Should they repair or replace the organ? What should they do? What is the way forward?

They decided to rebuild the church, but not exactly the way it had been before. They rebuilt the roof and made repairs to the walls, windows and floors. They replaced the organ. But, instead of repairing the pews they decided the nave of the church would become a dining room for the soup kitchen every day except Sunday. Each Saturday evening the tables would be put away, and chairs would be set up for Sunday worship services.

25 years later the return on this decision is strong and clear. The soup kitchen now feeds 1200 meals each day. With the additional space the soup kitchen has expanded to include programs that feed the minds and hearts of guests, such as art and literacy classes. The congregation is active and strong and is now 50% larger than it was back in 1980 when the bishop wanted to close the parish.

The example of the Church of the Holy Apostles helps us understand our way forward will require us to do new things. We will be required to look around us, at all of the possibilities. We will be required to take risks. We will be required to be productive.
This is the message of the parable of the talents. The parable of the talents is one of the most shocking stories in the New Testament. Many people really do not like this parable, and for good reason. The parable of the talents is not nice. The story does not seem fair. The treatment of the main character seems harsh and cruel. And the message of the parable seems to be devoid of the principles of Christian discipleship: patience, mercy, forgiveness, loving kindness and justice. But we cannot move forward, we have no future as people who follow Jesus, if we do not understand and follow the message of the parable of the talents.

In order to understand we have to connect it to what Jesus has said just before this in the Gospel of Matthew. Chapter 25 of the Gospel of Matthew is like a triptych of stained glass windows, it is like a piece of art that is constructed in three panels. Each panel holds part of the message, but the truth cannot be seen by looking at just one of the panels. We looked at the first of the three panels last week. We read the story of the wise and the foolish maidens. The message boiled down to just two words: ‘be prepared’. Following the way of Jesus is not something we can do at the last minute. We spend many years preparing to make divine love the center of our lives.

Today we look at the second panel: Jesus said, “It is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. You have just heard the entire parable so I will not repeat the entire story again. Let’s just notice a few details that are relevant to our situation.

First, notice that each slave is entrusted with an enormous amount of money. You might think that the one who receives one talent got a bad deal. That is not true. His master entrusted him with the equivalent of 17 years worth of wages. For our purposes, let’s just say that his master entrusted him with $300,000. It is true that the master trusted the first slave with $1.5 million and the second slave with $600,000. But the point here is that all of us, even those who have the least, have been entrusted with generous resources.

Second, notice that the slaves who were entrusted with five talents and two talents did not do something completely crazy. Notice also that both of these characters received the exact same reward, which was to be entrusted with more decisions and to enter into the joy of the master.

It was the fearful slave who did something that made no sense whatsoever. The fearful slave buried $300,000 in the ground, and he buried the money while knowing that his master is a businessman. He knows his master is concerned, above all else, about productivity. Yet, he did the one thing that was guaranteed to not produce anything: he buried $300,000 in the ground. It was the fearful slave who did something that was guaranteed to fail.

Finally, notice the place in the story where the master becomes irate. The master is filled with rage when the fearful slave becomes defensive and justifies his inaction by accusing the master of illegal and immoral activities.

The point is that we say we want to follow this way. We could call it the way of discipleship, or the way of Jesus, or the way of divine love. But we think we can do all of the other parts, we think we can be fair and love others and be prepared and everything else, without ever having to any risk. That is not possible.

We think we can do all of those good things, without giving up something, without giving up some security. Then when someone points out to us that our fearful inaction has not produced anything we get defensive, just like the fearful slave in the story. Blaming other people is not going to help one bit.

Love means taking risks. Mercy means being active in the world, not being fearful. Justice means giving something up. God has given us generous gifts and God demands that we be productive. God demands that our love be productive, that our love make a positive difference, that our love would change the world.