

# The Long Tail

Matthew 25:14-30 | 11/13/2011

Heads or tails. When you hear those words, you probably think of a coin toss. This afternoon, all across the country, football players will gather at the 50-yard line, and a coin toss will determine the team that receives the kickoff. But I don't want to talk about football. I want to talk about cats. About their heads and their tails.

In the business and financial world, a cat is a bizarre metaphor for sales and merchandise.

Taking publishing, for example. You've got your best-selling authors like John Grisham, Steven King, Margaret Atwood, Dan Brown and so on. Walk into a bookstore and you will *never* have any trouble finding books by popular authors and *only* popular authors. That limitation is the head of the cat.

Or DVDs. Go to Blockbuster and chances are you will have no trouble getting a DVD of most of the movies out last summer: *Thor*, *Captain America*, as well as other recent titles. And that's about it. That limitation is the head of the cat.

Or music CDs. Visit Sam Goody's or Virgin Records and you'll need only a few minutes to find a CD by Maroon 6, Frank Sinatra, Lady Gaga or Elton John. All the big names are there. Not much else. That limitation is the head of the cat.

But suppose you want George Meredith's early 20th-century book, *The Egoist*? Suppose you want the film adaptation of W. Somerset Maugham's book *Of Human Bondage*, the 1934 classic starring Bette Davis? Suppose you want a CD of The Coasters "One by One"? You're not going to find these items in most bookstores, video stores or music stores. This is not the head of the cat; this is the tail of the cat.

The *head* of the business cat equals *limited* choices, fewer options. You want a best seller? Fine. Want anything else, lotsa luck. Like Sister Prunita to Catholic schoolgirls: "You can wear whatever color shoes you like as long as they're black."

The *tail* of the business cat equals *unlimited* choices, unlimited options, and you'll find the long tail of business not in a brick- and-mortar store, but on a click-and-order Internet Web site — sites where you can get the best sellers and easy-to-find stuff, but find the obscure and arcane as well.

The long tail. Unlimited options. Unlimited choices. Abundance. Uniqueness. Creativity. And that's where Jesus wants us to live. That's what Jesus wants us to experience.

In today's Scripture lesson, Jesus tells the story of a man who goes on a journey, and before embarking on his trip he distributes his property among his servants. To one he gives — in modern, pre-inflation dollars — \$1,000,000, to another, \$400,000, and to a third, a mere \$200,000.

The one with a million invests his million and makes another million, making Warren Buffet look like an intern at E.F. Hutton. The one with \$400,000 turns it into \$800,000. But the servant with \$200,000 incredibly digs a hole in the back yard, stashes the cash in a coffee can, and waits.

The guy is so *risk-adverse*. He's afraid he'll lose the cash. He's afraid of the consequences of losing the cash. He's afraid of the master's reaction if he loses the cash. So he simply hangs on to the cash. He got the cash, but he's limited his options. He's limited the possibilities.

He opted not to opt. He's chosen not to choose. He's a one-talent schmo, a shlemiel, a *nebekh*, afraid to grab the long tail of abundance, choices and creativity. He's like a bookstore that fills all its available space with John Grisham and Steven King novels. Definitely not Bookmans!

The five-talent entrepreneur moves out onto the long tail. He looks around and sees a world of abundance, a universe of opportunity, a cosmos of choices. He knows that he can multiply his holdings if he is willing to take a few chances. Risky business, for sure, but insanely profitable for one who's willing to embrace the long tail.

So where are we living — at the head of the cat, or on the long tail? Is our spiritual cash in a coffee can or multiplying in a free and competitive market? It's time for us to move to the tail, and embrace the world of abundance.

Fortunately, we don't have to rely on our own expertise or lack thereof. In the spiritual world we occupy, insider trading is perfectly legal. God, the very one whose capital we're playing with, will also give us tips on how to spend it.

This means that we trust God enough to make use of the gifts and abilities we have been given, whether our particular passion is for teaching children or cooking meals or repairing homes or programming computers. God wants us to be the unique individuals he's created us to be, people who may have unusual but valuable abilities.

On the long tail, we find nursing assistants who take great pride in keeping their patients clean and comfortable, carpenters who gain enormous satisfaction from building quality homes, teachers who find joy in the discoveries of the classroom, attorneys who keep the goal of justice at the very center of their practices, artists who are committed to bringing beauty into day-to-day life, and store clerks who place good service at the heart of their own personal mission statements. Most of these workers will never achieve national recognition like the authors of best-selling books, but they'll make a lasting impact on the world around them by their willingness to invest the talents they've been given.

It's equally important for the church, the body of Christ, to be like the servant with a cool million who goes out and aggressively invests his resources. Within our community of faith, we have a great storehouse of talents, and God calls us to live in a world of abundance by taking risks and being generous.

This means that we're always willing to try new things, by sharing our abilities in creative worship and innovative educational events, for example. It means that we look outward to a world in need, and do what we can to feed hungry children, house homeless adults, and welcome the strangers and immigrants in our midst. God doesn't want us to live in a world of scarcity and conserve what we have; instead, he wants us to invest our time and talents and treasures in ways that multiply our effectiveness as ambassadors of Christ.

When we move onto the long tail, we make the bold assumption that there's going to be a demand for every one of our talents. We step out, with confidence, believing that every God-given gift we have is going to be exceedingly useful and fruitful! Abundance versus scarcity. No limits versus limits. Choices versus no choices. Rainbow versus monochrome.

Jesus couldn't be any clearer in today's passage of Scripture. He says that when the master returns, the servants who invested their talents are described as "good" and "faithful," and they are given additional gifts. But the servant who buried his single talent is not only negligent, he is described as "wicked" and "lazy" (v. 26) and "worthless" (v. 30). Jesus obviously wants us to embrace the world of abundance, and to live on the long tail by investing our peculiar talents in the work of the kingdom.

The challenge for us is to live by faith, and to trust that God will give us what we need for an abundant life. Every one of us has an opportunity to hear Christ's message, and respond with faithfulness by investing the gifts we have been given.

Of course, some will respond, and some will not. Some will be like the servant with five talents, and some will be like the servant with one talent. Some will take risks and be generous, and some will remain cautious and close-fisted. Some will accept the idea of abundance, and some will hold to the myth of scarcity. Some will sit on the head of the cat, and some will venture onto the long tail.

The only question that matters this morning is: What will *you* do? Worth thinking about as you prepare your estimate of giving for the coming year, isn't it? So, you call it. Heads or tails?

*Pastor Keith*

## Children's Sermon

Hold up a football, and ask the children if they ever play the game with their friends, or if they watch it on television. Explain that the quarterback is the first player to be given the ball, and he has to make decisions about what to do with it, so that he can move the ball forward. Let them know that he can hand it off to another player (hand ball to a child) ... or he can pass it down the field to another player (pass the ball gently to another child) ... or he can hang on to it himself, and try to run forward by himself (tuck the ball close to your body). Have the children vote on what they think are the most successful ways for the quarterback to move the ball forward ... handoffs ... passing ... or running with the ball himself. Explain that handoffs and passing are much better than hanging on to the ball, and the same is true in today's parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30). Point out that three slaves receive money, called "talents," in the story, and the first two slaves invest their talents in activities that are risky but profitable, like passing a football or handing it off — they let go of their talents, but by letting go they move things forward. Then say the third slave held on to his talent, and refused to let go of it, like a quarterback keeping the ball to himself. Encourage the children to be like the first two slaves, and to be willing to share with others so that we can all move forward together, like a football team marching to a goal line. Close by saying that Jesus is not happy with people who always hold tight to what they have, whether they are holding on to footballs or talents.