Pardon my pronunciation: “Navigare necesse est, vivere non est necesse.” According to Plutarch, the words were uttered by Pompey the Younger (originally in Greek, which was back then the language of the Roman Empire); they have become more famous in Latin. “To sail is necessary; it is not necessary to live.” “To sail is essential; to live is not.”

The words are generally misused today as a motto for people who are really wrapped up in sailing as a hobby. (Like me ha ha.) Tongue in cheek, people apply the same formula to whatever they love to do best. Climb mountains. Shop. Play baseball. Eat. Whatever. It is not at all unusual for people to elevate one part of life to a level where it is more important than life itself. “To sail is indispensable; life you can do without.”

But in the original situation, it did not mean that. It meant something more like what Jesus tells us in today’s parable. Pompey, a Roman general, was going to sail from Africa to Rome with emergency food provisions. A great storm threatened their voyage, so that the sailors were reluctant to leave the harbor. Pompey told them to set sail with these words “To sail is necessary; it is not necessary to live.” They sailed. And Rome was fed.

Similarly, Jesus tells his disciples not to be hoarders of the gifts God entrusts to us, but to get out there and live for God.

In this parable, the first point of comparison is this: Life . . . is like money that is entrusted to us.

Isn’t that true? With life, you and I are constantly fed a stream of gifts from outside. Life itself, everything that sustains it, our senses, our power of reason, our energy and aptitudes, our society, our friends, experiences to enjoy, the natural environment, cars, boats, houses, input, input, input. Even at Lake Kopiago, where annual per capita income was probably less than $50, people threw away lots of food, and could not possibly have used all the clean water they had. They enjoyed more leisure in their short lives than you will have in your long life, and unquestionably viewed far more of the beauty of God’s nature. And life is a gift, since we don’t create ourselves. Self-made man never existed!

Plus, this life begs to be invested, used. Musicians are not given their abilities so they can amuse themselves. Nor do banks hold money just so they can have a lot. Why learn to cook, if you will never serve anyone? Every talent we have is or should be for others.

So, the first analogy is that our life is a trust given to us for each other.

The second point of comparison is this: For a very long time, we can get away with living either of two ways. People can in fact live for themselves, and do quite nicely, because whoever donates all these gifts is, apparently, not around. Like God. If God gave us all these things, it is as though he has gone away on a long trip. Jesus plants the idea of agnosticism right in the middle of this parable, by this second analogy which says that in the short run, which means as long as we live, there does not appear to be any reliable accountability in the system.
The third analogy is where the point of the parable lies. Eventually, finally, the consequences of living the one way or the other will come into view in a decisive way. And here is what Jesus is asserting: To invest / take risk / venture one’s life / sacrifice / live by faith / give oneself / become a servant to others / love / sail . . . involves, in the short term, letting go of what is most precious to us. Jesus talked about it all the time—stepping out of the boat, taking up your cross, living like sheep among wolves, suffering—right up until he had the opportunity to do it himself, practice what he preached, give it up on the cross, leave it all on the field of sorrow into which we have turned this world, and then he died.

Jesus asserted in this parable, before he went on to demonstrate it by his resurrection, that we should follow him by living like him, trusting his Father. The way great athletes play sports, the way great investors make lots of money, the way great musicians become artists . . . by faith. Except in our case, the object of our faith is the God who calls us to live for others without fear, even when it is not immediately obvious that it is the best way to live. As Paul says in Romans: The good person lives out of his or her faith.

To express this idea, Jesus once said we must hate our life in order to enter the kingdom of heaven. Hate gets misunderstood, but think of it as being interpreted by this parable: Your ship will never come in, if you don’t send it out. Navigare necesse est, vivere non est necesse. The wrong choice is to live as if it’s all about surviving; the right choice is to depend on God’s promise and call. Like Abraham and the whole catalog of believers in the promise, right up to today.

Of course, this is not merely a wise saying. When Jesus teaches us that it is better to give than to receive, or that those who mourn shall be comforted, he is not just dropping aphorisms about. He himself is promising, and guaranteeing to us, that our God will save those who sail out of the harbor by faith.

It is what he did. Given the chance to “sit it out or dance,” as Philippians 2 says, “though he was God, he did not count equality with God something to be hung on to, but gambled it all, sailed, emptied himself, and became a person, and gambled that as well by becoming a slave, and threw that away as well by becoming a convict, and got executed, losing it all on our behalf. But God raised him up and gave him not just five talents but five times five talents, the name that is above every name, etc. . . .”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “Every calling of Christ is a calling towards death.” And it looked like certain death when Pompey told his sailors to sail. The difference, of course, is that while Pompey was calling his men to roll the dice with courage, facing the real prospect of death, we do not roll the dice when we sail. Our faith is that when God is calling us, he is actually calling us away from death, and towards life itself. For life is not mere survival; it cannot successfully be hoarded.

Of course, it is not necessary to sail. It is also not necessary to be an investor, like the characters in the parable. God calls us into different ventures, in various venues. Look at the stories about the many different kinds of people with whom Jesus interacted in the Gospels. The common thread is not that he called them all to become preachers. But he called them all
to receive the spirit of God, so that they might work in God’s ways to heal the world. The God who has given us every gift, wants to fill our sails and move us towards joy and peace, and life. Amen.