

“The Parable of the Talents”

Sermon preached by Rev. Laurel Barr at Roseville Uniting Church

On Sunday 16th November 2008

Matthew 25:14-30

The American cartoonist Ashleigh Brilliant is well-known for his “Pot shots” and one-liners. He has a cartoon in which two luminous eyes, rounded in terror, peer out from the dark enclosure of a stone vault. Underneath, the caption reads: **“If you’re careful enough, nothing bad or good will ever happen to you”** (1)

Brilliant’s line takes us right to the core of this story that Jesus told. It’s certainly what the third slave thought as he sat on his talent. “If I’m careful enough nothing bad will happen to me - nothing good either - but at least everything is safe.” By playing it safe, everything will remain the same. Well... says Jesus - but let’s look at this story that Jesus told.

A talent in Jesus’ day was a coin worth around 6,000 denarii - To put it in perspective, one denarius was a day’s living wage. This means that the third slave buried 6,000 days or 15-16 years worth of wages for safety’s sake! That’s a huge amount not to use in any way!

And the first slave was given 30,000 denarii - more than a lifetime’s worth of wages. One commentator tries to convert a day wages times 30,000 for today- he calculates it would be about \$5 million? (2)

And so here in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus portrays God as an extremely rich and enterprising employer - a gambler even - who is ridiculously extravagant. Certainly this God does not “play it safe”. In Jesus’ day as in our day, money was a potent force. If you had it, you were able to wield enormous power and influence. On the other hand if you didn’t have money, you were at the mercy of those who did. God is often portrayed as being there for the poor so the people listening to Jesus would not have been used to thinking of God as a fabulously rich entrepreneur.

And for us if we have been listening to the news of a world financial meltdown, to hear Jesus talking in terms of money and investment and profit may also evoke mixed emotions.

Making our money work for us -investment - money-markets - profit and loss - risk management - fear of debt are all familiar language to us.

But in the light of what many of the so-called “Masters of the Universe” in the finance world have led us into, we may also well be finding it difficult to get our minds around Jesus talking about God in this way.

For in this story the enterprising Master doesn't instruct his slaves in what to do with the talents - the Master does not place safeguards around the huge amounts of money he entrusts to his employees. This Master trusts the three slaves to use their own initiative and imagination and enterprise in this economic venture. He has no guarantee on his return. He takes a huge risk. In these days as many people are calling for more regulation in the money markets, isn't this Master being irresponsible?

It would seem that the third slave thinks so: In this story the third slave alone refuses to involve himself in his Master's extravagant and risky enterprise. The others may share the Master's free and entrepreneurial style but the third slave sees the Master as a fierce and exacting man. In fact he is afraid of him and so he decides to do the careful thing and that is to sit on his money - to bury it - and then at least he can return it intact to his master. He will not have increased it. Nothing good will happen - but playing it safe, he will not have lost anything either. He will have avoided the bad.

I wonder: Are you cheering the enterprise of the first two slaves? Do you have sympathy with this careful third slave?

But what is this money - these talents - all about in this story? Jesus is a master storyteller. He uses stories from the everyday world to talk about God and God's ways and here Jesus is using money and investment not to endorse any financial system but as an image for what is potent and powerful in the world.

Jesus is using the image of money and what money can achieve to talk about just how powerful the life-giving Spirit of God is in our lives and when it is set loose just how powerful a force the Holy Spirit is in the world (2)

Jesus is talking about the power of God who is love and compassion. Here is a potent force if we receive it and invest it and allow it to flow through us to work in the world. In the parable all that vast sum of money that is given to the first, second and third slaves comes out of the enterprising activity of the Master and so it represents what God is already doing in the world. It is about what the Gospels call the kingdom of Heaven or the realm of God.

It's the power we see in Jesus to transform lives - power to heal the sick, the power of forgiveness and acceptance to turn around those who were ostracized as sinners and outcasts, the power to make the blind see and the deaf hear and the lame to walk, to feed the hungry and calm wild storms at sea and even to raise the dead to new life. It is about what St Paul calls the power of the ministry of reconciliation for “God was in

Christ Jesus reconciling - or bringing the world back to himself” This life-giving activity of God is potent - It achieves things and so much has been entrusted to us- especially the Good news of Jesus Christ.

But the power of God cannot work in our lives and community if we stifle it or sit on our experience of Jesus Christ and do not share it - if we try to contain it and control it. In fact if we play safe like the cartoon creature with saucer-eyes peering out of his bunker, Jesus says we are in danger of losing everything.

For this is what Jesus is concerned about. Let's look more closely at this third slave. For Jesus the third slave represents those righteous people in his day who were defensive about conserving the Jewish Law or the Torah as they interpreted and understood it. They were the careful who did not want anything changed or developed or expanded. They wanted to build their own fence around the Torah -around God. They wanted to play it safe.

For Jesus and later for the community of Matthew for whom this Gospel was written, this was a major issue. You see the Gospel of Jesus Christ is not just confined to this righteous group or even to the Jews. It threw the doors open to men and women, rich and poor, Jews and non-Jews or Gentiles - Jesus reached out to sinners and outcasts too.

And so the church of the first century to whom Matthew was writing were having to grapple with something new: How they could all live and worship and witness and serve together as one community? Matthew was wanting his readers to trust God enough to come on an adventure of being inclusive. He wanted them to invest their resources into people and areas which many of them had regarded as beyond God's interests.

There's a consistent theme in the Gospels that the potent force of God's transforming love and concern for people is free and creative and not limited within the boundaries we may impose about it. It bursts through into unexpected and surprising places and it values and welcomes people we may tend to ignore and even dismiss. (2) If we dare to allow God's love to flow through us it will push us across boundaries we might normally hesitate to cross and into adventures which involve change and risk.

But for the careful who like the third slave remain in their own comfort zones or bunkers believing that they are safe - these people, Jesus says will be in a place of great regret forever because they have missed out altogether. It's not just a matter of avoiding the bad and allowing the good to pass by if necessary, because they have actually closed themselves off from the power of God and lost everything and so they will weep at what might have been if they had only trusted God. That is the problem of the third slave: He did not trust his enterprising Master.

All this asks some very pertinent questions of you and me today: Firstly it raises questions for us as individual people - after all as Anthony Padavano, the Catholic scholar in his book *Belief in Human Life* points out life involves risk - "It is no easy thing to be a human being. A human life is the most unforeseeable and dramatic venture imaginable....No one knows what a child will become. Transformation is at issue in human living. there is risk, a measure of failure, and yet the possibility of becoming someone who transcends himself or herself and all limitation." (3)

It also raises questions of us as Roseville Uniting Church this week. We have already made some enterprising decisions with our Centenary Building Programme, the ReadySteadyGo programme for disadvantaged children, with the employment of our staff and now we actually are into this building phase and we stand on the cusp of making decisions about our worship arrangements. So....

Do we trust this God - this enterprising God?

Or are we sometimes like the third slave who shaped his Master according to his own fears and insecurities about the future?

Do we bunker down and sit on our experience of the life and power of God - content so long as nothing too bad happens?

Do we trust God enough to be entrepreneurial as a congregation - to step out as an individual - or are we afraid of losing everything?

Brilliant's cartoon of two luminous eyes, rounded in terror peering out from a stone vault is haunting. "If you're careful enough, nothing bad or good will ever happen to you."

On the other hand it's a compelling thought that God is like a risk-taking "multimillionaire". Indeed in the Bible we read that his store of mercy never ends and his love has no limits.

This morning do we dare to risk it with God?

Do we trust God enough to dare to allow the power of God's love to move through us and to let it transform our fears and expand our limitations and even to entrust us with ever increasing responsibilities to help to make a difference in the world?

After all God risked his own beloved Son

and God is prepared to take a risk with us!

Let's spend a few moments in reflection.....

And now I invite you if you wish to make this your prayer:

Enterprising God, all of us from time to time have dug our hiding places
and buried our songs or our silver.

Thinking our voices too weak and our offerings too small,
we have buried our talents out of fear.

What bothers us here is the reaction of the third slave,
For Jesus is talking to us, the ones who have been entrusted with God's Word. (4)

O God, your Son Jesus reminds us that it is your gifts we bury and so in this time -in this place
we want to unearth our talents and offer to you all that we have -all that we are. Amen.

Resources

- (1) From Denis McBride, *Seasons of the Word*, Redemptionist Publications, 1991,p.365
- (2) William Loader, *First Thoughts on Passages from Matthew in the Lectionary, Pentecost 27*,
wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au
- (3) Fran Salone-Pelletier, *Awakening to God, Year A*, Twenty-third Publications, 2004,p.191
- (4) Adapted from Ann Weems, *Searching for Shalom*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1991 - in
Seasons of the Spirit, Congregational Life Pentecost 2 2008, p.93