



Sermon by Rev Ross Pearce Highfield Road Uniting Church November 16, 2014

Matthew 25: 14-30

Three men are having a coffee and a chat one morning – a priest a minister and a rabbi. They get around to discussing the offerings and how they divide up the money. The priest says, “I have circular pattern on the carpet and I throw the money in the air and what lands in the circle I keep and what lands outside the circle goes to God”. The minister says, “I have something similar but when I throw the money up, what lands in the circle goes to God and what lands outside the circle I keep”. And the Rabbi says, “I throw the money in the air, and what God wants he catches and what lands on the ground I keep”.

We are culturally conditioned to the rule of three in story telling; the first two characters or situations set up the premise and the expectation and the third is the point, either the joke or the twist. And it is not just our cultural conditioning, examples in scripture show that the listeners of 1st Century Judea understood things the same way. The parable of the Samaritan is a good example, the priest and the Levite walk past the injured man and you are waiting for the third character to make the point. Like also does the same thing with the parables of the lost things, coins, sheep and then the son. Given that background, how is it that we have difficulty with this parable of the servants and absent master? We don't take away the message from the parable of the Samaritan that it's our job as religious people to avoid contact with the problems of the world, and yet we so easily get lost in the image of capitalism and growth shown by the first two servants in this parable and downplay what is going on with the third servant.

While Matthew and Luke have different details, they both give us a Jesus story based on the rule of three and want us to look carefully at what is going on in the interchange between the third servant and the master. This is not a parable of analogies where Jesus is the master and the servants are disciples; this is a parable with one meaning – we are called to follow, and emulate, a generous, loving, passionate and risky God.

This is a parable full of distractions because of the details of the story. What is a talent? Are we meant to double whatever God has given us? Is the Gospel really all about capitalism? Let's follow the rule of three and focus on the third servant; what was his understanding of his master, his understanding of the task he was given and what was his prime motivation? That is what Jesus, and Matthew and Luke, want us to focus on. While

Jesus is gone from the church, what is our attitude to be as we await the full coming of the kingdom?

The third servant says to his master, “Master, I knew you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed” Is that what you think of God? Is that your understanding of the one whom we are called to follow? We can look to the attitude of the Pharisees and the Sadducees and indeed some of the passages in the Old Testament and get that idea about God. Whereas, the dominant image of God in the Gospels is Jesus – “if you have seen me you have seen the Father” - loving, compassionate and inclusive. The third servant’s image of a harsh and demanding master is so corrupting that it doesn’t even lead to logical behaviour. “If you knew I was so demanding, why didn’t you deposit my money in the bank?” The message here is an attitude to avoid – it poisons your whole outlook and behaviour.

The third servant thought his task was to look after what he had been entrusted with – his master’s property. Even a very generous reading of his behaviour would say that he was overly prudent and didn’t want to risk losing any of his master’s money – he didn’t trust the markets and he didn’t trust his own management skills so he buried the money. His attitude was one of preservation – “I must preserve what I have been entrusted with” – so that he could say to his master when he returned, “Here is what is yours”. Is that what we think we are doing here - preserving the church? Again, the Pharisees and the Sadducees had that attitude – the law and the Temple practices have been entrusted to us and we must preserve them. Whereas, the dominant image in the Gospels is one of growth – vines, mustard seeds, wheat – and with growth comes change and risk. The message here is an attitude of stewardship and management that looks outward for opportunity and engagement – preservation shuts you in to your own little world.

But the biggest message here is to not give into fear; fear of judgement and punishment, fear of failure or fear of losing what you have. The dominant motivation for the third servant was fear and fear really does poison your outlook and shut you down to the world. It isn’t Star Wars that invented the idea that fear leads to the dark side. The dominant message of the Gospels is to let love conquer fear. Love of the master instead of fear would have opened up all the possibilities for this man to use the money that he had been given wisely – the parable says that he was given the money according to his abilities.

Consider the setting for the telling of this parable. Jesus is sitting on the Mount of Olives facing Jerusalem after having confronted the religious leaders in the Temple. He is in the riskiest place at the riskiest time of his life; there is no place here for thoughts of preservation or playing it safe. Jesus is risking it all for the Gospel; that is who we are asked to follow and emulate. If we look to the first few chapters of Acts, we see this

parable being played out in the behaviour of the disciples. They are in the locked upper room, for fear of the authorities, choosing a new twelfth disciple – preserving what they have been given – when the Spirit blows them outside to the risky life of proclaiming Jesus, the crucified and risen Saviour. Instead of preserving twelve, they get a harvest of thousands! Maybe we would understand this parable better if the second servant didn't double his money the same as the first – “Master, you handed me two talents, see, I have made a half a talent more”. Risk isn't always rewarded, remember Paul in Athens? But risk and engagement are what we called to; not the fear and preservation that characterised the third servant.

That is the attitude to adopt as we live in this 'time between the times', waiting for the fullness of the kingdom. We seek to hold on to our faith by finding what keeps us going (last week's message) and we take what we have been given and live by the risky engagement of the world with the message of God's love in Jesus Christ.