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Sermon transcript

St Philip Oak Bay

9.30 am Eucharist 19 November 2023

Fr. Allen Doerksen

Sermon starts 34:04

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w_Vn4zQkNOg&t=2044s>

Please be seated.

Perhaps you didn’t feel like singing, “Alleluia”, after David’s reading made your knees quake! It did mine – well done. Both well done!

So, we’re going to tackle that difficult and harsh-sounding parable this morning. I was thinking about how we could get into it in a way that would make sense in continuity with what we’ve been talking about in the previous two weeks, and in a way that will lead into the climax of the Reign of Christ, the feast of the Reign of Christ, that we will look at next week, the last part of chapter 25 [of the Gospel of Matthew]. And I thought about parents, those of you that are parents here, we walk a kind of knife-edge with our kids as they come into their teenage years, on into their early adulthood, and increasingly, at least in my experience, throughout their twenties, maybe sometimes into their early thirties. We long for them to experience the joys of life, and so we want them to explore the world, have great relationships, and discover their uniqueness. We want them to know this exquisite freedom of being a human person. We sum up these hopes with the exhortation that is common in our culture, “Follow your hearts.” Follow your bliss, your passion. But – But. We are deeply concerned, from a received wisdom of living in this world, knowing a little bit about how the world works, that unless they bound their exploration, unless they experience disappointment, the difficulty, the sheer difficulty of building good and lasting relationships, and the necessary commitment to wrestle those “blisses”, those passions, into something vocation-shaped – that is, unless they come to understand and practise a reasonable amount of responsibility and stewardship, that being a human person, the life of a human person will be far more painful than it needs to be. And so without batting an eyelash, without any separation, we say, right after “Follow your heart,” “Don’t just listen to your heart, plan wisely!” So we attempt, don’t we, as parents, to walk this ridgeline ourselves, and we hope our children will not fall off either extreme.

Now something like this, I posit, I hypothesize, believe it nor not, is going on in what is commonly known as Jesus’ Parable of the Talents. This is part of the section of Matthew’s Gospel where Jesus is at his most dominical, his most regal, his most kingly, if you will, clearly acting the parent, the new, the greater Moses, seeking to lay out a path of wisdom that has been ignored, he believes, to Israel’s coming peril. And Jesus is constantly facing this unenviable task of trying to help his immediate followers, but he’s always speaking over their shoulders, to the leaders of Israel, hoping that both groups will come to understand that a transformative relationship with God, yes, begins in the heart, has to begin in the heart, if it’s ever to be truly transformative, but that such a relationship is not just mere feelings, but has enormous implications for how we responsibly live, for how we attempt to shape society.

To live well, then, for starters, we need this positive vision of God. We need to know that we’re fully accepted by God, that we have a freedom to explore God’s influence in the world and in our lives, while at the same time exercising a commitment to engage responsibly, to participate with God’s vision – with God in this vision. And that’s what the Parable of the Wedding and the five wise and five foolish maidens is trying to get at, or so I argued, or tried to express, in my fumbling way, last week. Thank you, by the way, for being patient listeners as I try to make my way through these interesting but often difficult tales that we have taken in, in our own lives, in certain ways over the decades, and I understand that sometimes I’m taking them in quite a bit of a different direction than you may be used to, but you are very gracious to me in that; you have conversations with me via email and in person – let’s keep it up. I’m always up for constructive correction and/or bemusement – all kinds of things. We’re in this together.

Jesus isn’t finished talking about this fundamental reality, though. Matthew connects this parable of the talents with this previous parable of the wedding by having Jesus say, “For it is as if…” - there’s our clue, this is going to be an extended metaphor – “it is as if a man going on a journey summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them. And the picture he sketches, of a man giving money to his slaves to invest, and one of them not playing the market at all, has been used of course, in the west, to prop up our version of capitalism, and it’s been misunderstood as a motivational speech in which we’re being urged to fulfil our potential. Indeed our word “talent”, as in, “Dave is a talented musician,” comes from this parable. But that’s not what it means in the parable; it’s a unit of money. Indeed, it’s an enormous amount of money: one talent equals about 15 years of wages for an ordinary Israelite. Two talents would be more than most people’s whole working lives in that time, because of course the life expectancy was short. And five talents was untold riches for an ordinary person, let alone slaves.

This is the clue we need to know that Jesus isn’t talking about capitalism, or about investing our money, or indeed about maximizing our skills and potential, although there might be some outgrowth in that direction from what his main point really is, at least in the way that I see the parable. That the master is entrusting all his property to his slaves is, first of all, ridiculous, in the ancient world, but it also helps us to understand that what Jesus is talking about is not responsibility per se, since what is given to the slaves are gifts beyond their reckoning. There’s no CV for a slave that includes what this master does. The line “to each according to their ability” is probably better interpreted, “to each according to their view of themselves.”

As per usual, then, Jesus is painting a cartoon, a caricature picture to help us grasp the point. A talent is an inexpressible gift – let’s call it the gift of life, of existence. The question is, how will we live? How *will* we live? How will you trade it, in the words of the parable. The focus in the parable itself is on the slave with the one talent, who has a negative vision of his master – which is kind of strange, right, given what the slave has been given: an incredible amount of money. His orientation, though, is one of fear, and that’s what Matthew is drawing our attention to: this slave seems to have a zero-sum view of God and his world. A zero-sum view of the world is when we fear that if another person gains resources of any kind, whether those be financial, relational, even spiritual, well, then I lose. You gain, I lose. And I see this when, in a partnership, one partner is flourishing at work and another partner is struggling, maybe, to find work, or not finding fulfilment in work, and becomes resentful. Or when sibling compare themselves to one another, imagining that one is better than the other, or that one is more loved than the other, as if extravagant love towards one takes away love from the other. And then this leads to more protectiveness, as we see in the parable itself, more caution, and later, more regret and bitterness.

And this has happened to Israel’s leaders. They haven’t been able to imagine something other than a zero-sum world – that if they shared what they had, that is, if they opened, if they got rid of their fancy robes and imagined that they’re all in it together, that if they shared their spiritual resources, made it into a true religious commons, or if they emptied – or not even emptied, but just took some of the money from – the temple coffers, and began to share it liberally in acts of mercy with those who are poor, instead of judging them as being sinners, and [as though] that’s why they were poor, if they would have done that, they would have all been better off, the leaders themselves would have been enriched. So what’s good for the goose is good for the gander as they say – of one of you turns out to have more insight than I do, great! I’m not diminished! We’re all enriched, we’re enlarged spiritually. If you share your spiritual gifts and your vocational know-how in places other than St Philip, we’re all enriched. I once had a family doctor like that – the intensity with which he listened and learned from his patients was amazing. Several times, he changed his prescription that he was going to give me based on what I told him. He was never threatened by my insights – he just added them to his wealth of knowledge as a medical doctor. I thought that was marvellous. So then the ones who find their talents doubling when the master returns are those who use their life, if you will, in a kind of naïve way. They’re not calculating – you know, “What’s going to bring me the greatest gain, and what’s going to work out well for me?” They’re living, they’re participating. They’re in this great adventure of living with God, and they’re enjoying the created order and human accomplishment. And so they can “invest”, if you will, and when they make mistakes, they know that they’re not forsaken but forgiven. They’re at the wedding, they’re participating. They’re free to take risks. They understand that it’s not everyone doing what is right in their own eyes, which is a common refrain in the Book of Judges, the book we read from in our first reading, though not in this particular reading.

Nor is it a matter of putting a fence around the law and doubling down on being cautious and hovering over our decisions lest we make a mistake; rather it is knowing that God has given us more than we can ask or imagine, an inexpressibly wonderful gift, and that God has committed to helping us live from and into this gift, by the Spirit that infuses our hearts. And then, responsibility flows, from that genuine freedom, from that gift. We’re not in a zero-sum world, your gain is my gain, and vice versa. We are called to the incredibly holy task of helping each other believe in ourselves; that is, we are called to believe in ourselves because God believes in us, and has called us into partnership. We can, of course, choose not to live in that kind of way, and when we do, we’re fundamentally diminished. The metaphor of burying it in the ground is a good metaphor at that point.

I always find that the zero-sum way of looking at the world is a bit of a self-fulfilling prophecy: we fear that we’re going to lose, and because we fear that we’re going to lose, we lose. And indeed it’s like those that have, gain. But clearly this is not some sort of economic exchange that’s going on here, because Jesus himself has said, you know, “The last will be first and the first will be last.”

He has told us he’s come that our burden may be light, the yoke may be easy and our burden will be light. So this is not a reversal of his teaching; he called us to live in partnership with the gift that is given to us, and as we learn to do that, in our actions and in our hearts, our life opens to us, and our life begins to surpass our own plans. It’s a beautiful thing . Our joy becomes God’s joy, and that joy is meant to increase. I pray that for you, I pray that for me. I pray that for this community, that we will understand, and just a little bit more, venture, adventure, with a God who gives us this freedom.

Amen.