



Sermon: - 20th November 2016

Risky Business

Psalm 100; Matthew 25: 14 – 30

This morning we are on a quest, on an adventure. We are looking for buried treasure. We do have a map and some clues so it is not a hopeless task by any means, but it might not be as straightforward as it looks. Our search will be like a detective story as we look for the treasure. We will have to identify the clues and interpret them to discover their secret meanings. Our map is the parable we read, and the clues to secret meanings are scattered throughout the parable. And like any detective story there are false trails along the way, red herrings and blind alleys that may look promising but will not in the end lead us to the treasure.

So let's begin by looking at the bigger picture. As in any good investigation we look at the wider context. We all know from detective stories that it is not just the scene itself that is important but all the circumstances and people that surround it, so what is the context for this particular story? This parable comes in the midst of sayings of Jesus which relate to the coming of the kingdom of God. The first parable about the wise and foolish bridesmaids waiting for the bridegroom. The wise bridesmaids had taken extra oil so that when the bridegroom was delayed they could keep their lamps burning, while the foolish bridesmaids fell asleep and allowed their lamps to go out before the bridegroom came. This parable that we read today, and the following one, a very familiar parable about the sheep and the goats and Jesus separating them at the gates of heaven. All three parables contrast wisdom and foolishness, preparedness and laziness and paint a picture of what happens to us depending on whether we are wise or foolish, prepared or lazy. Will we be ready? Or, like the foolish bridesmaids, like the cowardly servant, will we have gone to sleep, given up being vigilant, taken our eye off the ball, our foot off the pedal; will we be unprepared and found wanting? In the closing section of this chapter we see the sheep who have followed Jesus faithfully separated from the goats who have not. This whole chapter looks at the choices we make and the results of those choices in the final analysis, on the judgement day, if you like.

So the first clue is that this parable has something to do with the kingdom of God, and how we get there.

But before we get too deeply drawn into solving this mystery, let's consider three common false trails so that we can get them out of the way.

The first of these is that the parable tells us that if we are faithful God will make us prosperous. That this parable is about money. But this could not be further from the truth. After all, Jesus then goes on to tell us that the way to heaven is to clothe the naked, feed the hungry and give water to the thirsty. So this parable is not telling us that God will reward us with riches, nor that storing up wealth is the way to heaven

The second false trail is that this parable is all about being rewarded for good service after we die. "Well done good and faithful servant", and although that is part of the meaning, there is much more to it than that.

The third false trail initially looks more promising. It is that the parable is about using our talents for the kingdom of God. This is a tempting interpretation because the word translated here bags of gold is translated in most other versions of the Bible as talent. But a talent, in biblical times, was a unit of currency and although it is certainly true that if we use our talents in the service of God we will find them developing and growing, this is a red herring in that it blinds us to the significance of the money that the servants were given. A talent is equal to about 6000 denarii. One denarius was a common labourer's daily wage so it would take him 6000 days to earn a talent. That makes a talent roughly equivalent to 16 years wages for the average worker. So five talents is comparable to 80 years worth of work, and even one talent was a considerable amount of money. It would be unlike Jesus to illustrate his point using astronomical sums of money by accident so what is the significance of this? Let's continue our quest to see what we can discover.

At this point I think we need to ask a question. What do the talents, or the bags of gold, represent?

The first clue is found in the opening verse, "For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them." The talents were the rich man's property, given to his servants. He didn't give them to just anyone. If we think about talents, everyone has some so they don't quite relate to the talents in the parable which were given only to the three servants. And also our talents are not on loan from God. We have them from when we are born till we die. So perhaps what the parable means is that God lends us something of great value because we are his children, just as the rich man lent his property to his servants, and not just anybody.

The second clue is found in the next verse, "to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability." The last word here is significant. If we replace the word ability with skill or talent we see that the rich man gave his money to his servants in accordance with their talent, presumably a talent for giving good service and making more money. So this gift that we are trying to identify is given to each of us according to our natural talents to make use of it.

The third clue we can deduce from the direction the parable takes next. The right use of the talent involves risk. The first two servants were commended for putting the money to work, and the third punished because he did not. He played it safe and this was the wrong thing to do.

The fourth clue and last clue, I think, is that the risk was taken for the benefit of the property owner, not for their own gain. They did not know at the beginning that they would be given a reward; they simply did what they thought was right.

So if we sum up these four clues what do we have? The bags of gold represent something that belongs to God but is given to us on the basis that we have a natural ability for using it. Putting this natural ability or talent to work is a risky business but it is a risk that is for the sake of the Kingdom and not for our own sake.

What does God give to us in such huge measure as could be represented by astronomical sums of money? Perhaps it is his love which he pours out on each of us and we receive to the extent that we are open to it. But he gives us his love in the expectation that we would, in turn, give it away. That we would be so inspired by his love for us that we will extend that love to other people and draw them into the family of God so that they too might experience this amazing gift. And the more of his love we give away to others, the more we have for ourselves, while, if we do not love others, our love for God will in the end shrivel up and die.

I think this makes sense when we consider the following passage in which people are judged to be sheep or goats depending on whether or not they have shown love to those who are in need.

Have we finally come to the end of our quest? Have we discovered our buried treasure? Have we followed the clues and deciphered them correctly? The answer to that will be; to what extent does this interpretation fit with the broader message of the gospel? I think it does. The overarching message of the gospel is that God loved us and that he wants us to love him enough that we want to love others in the same way. The two great commandments: love God and love your neighbour as yourself.

This parable asks us to take a risk. It asks us to step outside our comfort zone and take a chance in loving others. To open the doors of our communities, our church and our hearts to those who are outside our bounds.

This Sunday comes at the end of Guild Week. Although I suspect that this reading was chosen for Guild Week because of its reference to talents and the extent to which Guild members use their talents in the service of the church I think this other interpretation also makes it a very appropriate passage. Over the years the various Guild projects have taken the love of God out to a great number of people whose lives have been transformed by what the Guild has done. In small ways and in large the Guild has played its part in building the kingdom of God here on earth. Jesus asks us to live dangerously and to love extravagantly. I think the Guild does that. Do we do that? Because it is a risk.

C.S Lewis, the Christian writer and broadcaster wrote: "To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully around with hobbies and little luxuries, avoid all entanglements, lock it up safe in the casket or the coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket - safe, dark, motionless, airless - it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable."

As we see from the parable, it is a risky business to step outside your comfort zone, but I suggest that we also see from the parable that it is even riskier not to. Let's take a risk for God, and learn to love extravagantly.