

Going for Broke

Matthew 25:14-30

Rev. Benjamin Broadbent
November 16, 2008

I.

Sometimes folks ask me how I go about choosing the passage of scripture upon which I preach. To be honest, I choose by allowing an international and ecumenical group of biblical scholars to limit the choices for me. The Revised Common Lectionary is a schedule of readings used by churches and pastors of many denominations. Briefly, the lectionary is divided into a 3 year cycle - A, B, & C. Texts are chosen for Sundays to reflect their place in the Christian liturgical calendar. In general, each Sunday includes a text from the Old Testament, a Psalm, a Gospel reading, and an Epistle lesson. Often I choose the gospel text, but sometimes I choose one of the others.

Limiting myself to the prescribed lectionary texts is a practice that forces me to explore the possible meanings in potentially problematic texts.

Texts are problematic for one of two reasons. Some texts are too familiar, such as the Parable of the Prodigal son or the Christmas birth narratives.

Other texts are too strange, such as the texts that tend to show up around this time of year. These texts that turn up the volume on the judgment knob. They imagine end of the world scenarios which are only good news for some. These scenarios are often bad news for others. The peril in preaching the lectionary is that a text like the Parable of the Talents demands attention on a day we call "Celebration Sunday." I know you'll agree that nothing says celebration like "weeping and gnashing of teeth."

II.

Today is Celebration Sunday. The occasion is the conclusion of our Stewardship Pledge Drive. The focus is upon God's goodness and faithfulness. This is a time to rejoice. To give thanks. To look our neighbor in the eye and say "well done" and "praise God." It is a time of smiles and singing. So why, you are asking yourself, would our preacher exercise the questionable judgment of selecting the

Parable of the Talents and its “weeping and gnashing of teeth” as the text upon which to base our celebration? I agree that my judgment is perhaps questionable, but in an effort to avoid merely sentimental sermonic conclusions, I can’t help but be drawn to the challenge of facing that which is off-putting and even offensive. My Jacob-like goal is to wrestle a blessing out of that which is holy. It would be easier to ignore such texts. But, like Jacob, I’m willing to endure a disjointed hip if the angel with whom I struggle will name me and remind me that I am known to God.

III.

Let me begin by asking what I think is the most pressing question the story begs. What’s up with the third slave and why is his master so unforgiving?

Especially following last week’s parable of the prepared and unprepared bridesmaids, what’s so wrong with being cautious? If the moral of that parable was “better safe than sorry,” why wouldn’t that apply here?

This parable seems to be conveying the opposite. It seems to be counseling risk-taking as a way of multiplying the kingdom. In his excellent essay on this parable, Charles Cousar writes, “[the parable] clearly presupposes the departure of Jesus and his anticipated return.” The parables in chapters 24 and 25 “direct the hearer’s attention to the issues at hand, to faithfulness, preparedness, and risk. Waiting and watching for Jesus’ return really means being good stewards of all our resources, especially the gospel.” Cousar warns preachers not to use this parable as way of equating stewardship with pledging. Stewardship of the resources God gives is much bigger than pledging ministries and mission giving of a local congregation.

In fact, this parable does not depict church people, but slaves, that is, laborers, common everyday folk. Their master is going away and entrusts to them sums of money based, as verse 15 tells it, “each according to his ability.” In fact, a “talent” was a sum of money equal to more than 15 years’ wages for a laborer. I hope you can hear the humor in the story. Let me retell it this way. There was a coffee shop owner who was going on vacation for a month. The owner had three barristas, each of whom she paid an annual salary

of \$25,000. To the first barrista, she gave \$1,875,000 and said, “while I’m gone, invest this for me.” To the second, she gave \$750,000, and to the third \$375,000 with the same instructions. When the owner returned from her cruise, the first barrista had doubled the money: \$3,750,000. So had the second: \$1,500,000. But the third had hidden the money in the bottom of a loose leaf tea jar and returned the same amount given.

A few things occur to me when I hear this parable. First of all, the gift of talents is unwarranted, unprecedented, and even absurd. Why would you give your slave, or coffee jerk, almost 2 million dollars when you’re heading out of town? And yet, it seems to me, this is Jesus way of describing the gift of gift of faith, the gift of the awareness of God’s love and grace and mercy.

The unmerited gift is of astounding worth. In Cousar’s words, the gift is the gospel itself, capable of transforming the world. Are we going to sit on it or invest it with the hope that it will be multiplied into something even more astounding.

It also strikes me that when the master/coffee shop owner returns, he/she presumably collects back the capital investments money and the dividends.

And what do the faithful slaves/barristas get in return? Again, in Cousar’s words, “They got two things: First, they got more responsibility. ‘You have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things.’ The reward for taking the risk and managing the investment was the burden of greater risk and the challenge of larger investments. But with the responsibility came a second reward: the joy of the master’s presence. ‘Come on in and share my happiness!’” the *Good News Bible* translates it.”

Finally, I’m struck that for those who risk, God’s presence is a joy, but for the one who chooses security, the Lord is presumed to be and remains a harsh, irrational, unkind master who “[throws his worthless] slave into the darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” As vivid an image of hell as you’ll ever hear. As for this “weeping and gnashing of teeth,” I recall the words of Kathleen Norris, who wrote that “Hell is hearing the gospel and not

doing it.” Or, in the case of this parable, “Hell is receiving the gospel and then doing absolutely nothing with it.”

IV.

Love demands risk.

The risks of vulnerability, confrontation, and tenderness are requirements of friendship, marriage, partnership, parenting, and every other relationship.

Love demands risk.

The risk of disclosing to God the good, the bad, and the ugly of our lives is a requirement of deepening into relationship with the one who wants to invite us into the joy of his/her presence.

Love demands risk.

The risk of belonging to a people such as this, a local, limited, never completely satisfying but often surprisingly beautiful and gracious community who stumbles along all the while claiming to be the Body of Christ.

Love demands risk.

Risking it all, going for broke, letting go of cherished securities, letting go of preconceived notions of God and each other and ourselves.

God just gave you a gift worth more than 15 years’ salary.

It’s time to celebrate.

Amen.