

Sermon 11-15-20
Paul Purdue preaching

Once upon a time, there was a local lord who loved a growing market share. In Jesus' telling, this baron was "hard" harvesting where they did not plant seed and gathering produce in another person's fields. Jesus' audience of poor people and pharisees knew these absentee landlords and would not have mistaken the "baron" for God. We might imagine that this wealthy baron decided to visit Rome to see what kind of deals they might strike up there. King Herod's children studied in Rome with future caesars as classmates. A trip to Italy involved traveling by horse or camel until one reached the coast. Ships moved like city buses on a local route, hopped along the Mediterranean coast from one port of trade to the next. It made for slow sailing; it might take two months to get to Rome. When in Rome, one would see the sights and with Rome's patron driven, who-do-you-know, business approach it would take the baron years to open an Italian office. Without an empire wide mail system or phone service, no one could know for sure when the boss would return.

Now the parable's patron might have simply entrusted the day to day operations of their farms, vineyards, orchards, fishing boats, tannery, grainery, brewery, carting services, and local markets to the three managers. However, the baron invests these three managers with venture capital according to their abilities and experience. The commentators tell us to think of treasure chest when we think of a "talent", maybe 6,000 paydays or some wild sum like "a hundred million dollars". No longer are these three just tending to the shop; they are venture capitalists overseeing portfolios of say 500 million, 200 million, and 100 million of the baron's reserve funds. Interestingly, the baron gives them no specific instructions on where or how to invest their portfolios. However, they know the baron is aggressive, taking advantage of every opportunity to grow the business. What would you do with 100 million dollars? Would you bury it in the ground?

The parable prepares the church for the time when Jesus will go away to heaven! Matthew places the parable of the venture capitalist right after chapter 24, where Jesus warns the church to be careful about those preachers touting the rapture, second coming, or God's final judgment. Jesus tells this parable just after the Palm Sunday triumphal entry and money-changer protest. Before the week is over, Jesus will be put on trial, crucified, and raised up. The Risen Christ is not the same old Jesus they knew. This Matthew 25 parable asks us: What will the church do when Jesus ascends back into heaven? Will the church try anything new? Will we bury our treasure or take risks to share God's Good News?

What did the church do? Did we write a New Testament or stick to the traditional Scriptures? Do we Just write one Gospel or add Paul's letters? Do we risk not getting the exact Hebrew or Greek renderings right or do we translate the Bible into English? Did we baptize eunuchs? Did we include Gentiles? What did we do when we were kicked out of the synagogues? Why did we stop requiring circumcision, kosher meals, or Passover? Why do we worship on Sundays? Why do we reject

slaveholding? Why do we believe the earth revolves around the sun? Why do we ordain female priests and pastors? Will we officially invite same-sex couples to uphold the same marriage covenant as straight couples, blessing marriages in our churches, as they pledge to love and to cherish until separated by death? What will we do with the treasure? Is playing it as safe as possible what God desires from the church?

Do you believe God has given you a treasure? Life itself is a treasure. Look at your hands. Think of all they can touch, embrace, give, hold, write, create, and point! Think of our freedom to think, to love, to see, to hear, to feel, to forgive, to laugh, to dream again. Oh, our treasure is incalculable. What will we do with this treasure God has given us?

Jesus tells us, "I'll give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Anything you fasten on earth will be fastened in heaven. Anything you loosen on earth will be loosened in heaven. ... Whatever you fasten on earth will be fastened in heaven. And whatever you loosen on earth will be loosened in heaven. Again I assure you that if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, then my Father who is in heaven will do it for you. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I'm there with them." (Matthew 16:18; 18:18) Jesus was going away for a long time, so Jesus tossed the keys to us! What will we do with the keys to the kin-dom? Will we live in fear of making mistakes or risk building God's kin-dom? Do we live in freedom or fear? Will we use our keys to lock things down or open the doors?

What if we really believed?: "There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear, because fear expects punishment. The person who is afraid has not been made perfect in love. Perfect Love cast out all fear." (1 John 4) How can we fear our Christ who prayed from the cross, "Father, forgive them they do not know what they are doing"? Who do we understand God to be? Are we more loving than God? What do human parents do when our child hands us their handmade craft, but we do not know what it is or which way to hold it? What does love say when our beloved uncle spends hours in the kitchen only to give us soggy green beans, sugary sweet potatoes, and turkey drier than the Sahara? Do we understand God as a vindictive taskmaster or the eternal source of all love and forgiveness?

Lamenting the church's slow response to Hitler's rise in Germany, a "millennial" pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, said, "It is no good waiting indefinitely for a sign from heaven that will solve our problems... to procrastinate and pre-var-i-cate (dodge direct questions) simply because you're afraid of erring... seems to me almost to run counter to love. To delay or fail to make a decision may be more sinful than to make wrong decisions out of faith and love." (Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Prophet, Martyr, Spy)

After a long time, the venture capitalist returns home and checks on their investments. The best manager doubles the portfolio and now manages assets of a little over a billion dollars! The baron rejoices, "Excellent! You are a good and faithful servant! You've been faithful over a little. I'll put you in charge of much. Come, celebrate with me." The second executive doubles the portfolio to almost half a billion! The boss replied, "Well

done! You are a good and faithful servant. You've been faithful over a little. I'll put you in charge of much. Come, celebrate with me." The baron gives both the exact same response; it's about faithfulness not results! Finally the low performer shares, "I was afraid. And I hid my valuable coin in the ground. Here, you have what's yours." The venture capitalist calls the fearful manger lazy and unfaithful. The crippling fear of punishment led the one manger to take as little risk as possible. Burying treasure was considered the safest ancient option. Let's be clear, God has expectations for us. Indeed, the parable indicates we will be judged for not taking risks!

Faithfulness involves risk. The Apostle Paul saw Greeks worshipping with magic books and naked idols and said, "These people need to know Jesus". Paul would change the core rules to accommodate the new Greek Christians dropping circumcision and kosher diets! For these risky extra-scriptural innovations the church named Paul an apostle and put his letters in the Bible. John Wesley, an Oxford educated Greek scholar, saw hard-living, hard-drinking coal miners and loved them. Wesley went to the coal mines and preached at shift changes. Charles adapted bar tunes into new hymns. When these coal miners grew in faith, Wesley changed the rules and made them preachers. Wesley rejected parish boundaries, empowered female exhorters, opened "meeting houses" to skirt rules on unauthorized church planting, and ordained Coke and Asbury as bishops without any authority what-so-ever. We might talk about Doctor King writing from a Birmingham Jail or Francis Willard fighting for female inclusion! What will we do with the keys to the kingdom?

Why are we so afraid of making a theological mistake? Who do we understand God to be? By Mark's second chapter, the religious establishment is muttering and plotting against Jesus! By the crucifixion, the religious experts are sure Jesus is a blasphemer. In John 16, Jesus says, "I didn't say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. But now I go away to the One who sent me... I have much more to say to you, but you can't handle it now. However, when the Spirit of Truth comes, the Holy Spirit will guide you in all truth!" How did the church become such (what Doctor King called) "arch defenders of the status quo"?

Maybe it is in the DNA of religious institutions to always protect what we have! In Matthew 23, Jesus tells us how the church loves to build monuments to dead prophets, while chasing the modern prophetic voices out of town. Matthew 13 tells us that God's prophetic voice is not rarely welcomed on home turf. In fact, contrary to our American infatuation with popularity as a measure of faithfulness Jesus warns, "Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did with the false prophets." (Luke 6:24) Stephen, about to be the second Christian martyr (after Jesus), blasted the religious establishment saying, "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute?" What are we so afraid of? Why do we bury our treasure and use the keys to chain everything down? Who are we locking out? What risky scheme is the Spirit stirring up in your heart? What will we do with our keys and treasure chest?

What fears are holding us back? What chances might we take so that we might truly live? Will you risk ending a relationship that does you harm? Will you risk calling a counsellor? Will you risk living into who God created you to be? Will you risk being more generous, forgiving, loving, hopeful, or real? Will you risk selling some things for the Gospel? How long will we resist what the Holy Spirit and science can only seem to suggest? Will you risk trying again? How long will wait for a sign from heaven? What fears need to die so that we might truly live? Oh let us let go of crippling religious fears and get in step with the Spirit of Christ! Oh, let us believe the Good News of God's Love. Let us lean outwards away from the safety of our monuments and safe church perches and feel that breeze of the Spirit lifting us into new life in Christ!

Certainty and faith are not at all the same. Following Jesus itself is risky. *"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."* (Matthew 16:23) Reading in A Guide to Prayer for Ministers and Other Servants this week, I was inspired to adapt a reflection by Gordon McDonald. *"Light is not enough. Light is for the sake of life. We must live. We can only experience life if we live in the way that Jesus lived. To live we must give up what once seemed to be our lives. Until we have said, 'not what I want, but what you want Lord,' we are not truly alive. Our abandonment of comforting old idols and ideologies is necessary to find that place of deepest connection with God."*

Let us not live in fear, burying our treasure in the ground and barricading every doorway. Let us stop persecuting the prophets. Let us use our keys to open the doors so that more people might find life in Jesus name! Let us take the risks of doing something new for love, justice, and faith. Amen