

2023 11 19 – Go Big or Go Home

Scripture: Matthew 25:14-30 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

If someone said to you “Go Big or Go Home” how would that make you feel?

What does that saying, that idiom, bring up for you? (wait for answers: annoyed, angry, overwhelmed, motivated, inadequacy, confused) What do you think it means? (wait for answers: be brave, be bold, be daring, risk) I have to tell you this phrase reminds me of the words that came out of the mouths of some of the IBM executives that I encountered in my previous career. Some of those men (and they were all men in those days) were so rude and arrogant that I had very little use for them. I didn’t pick this title for today’s sermon because I liked the idiom, but rather because it evokes some of the same ideas and feelings that I experienced while reading and exploring today’s scripture passage.

Like all of Jesus’ parables, this parable, The Parable of the Talents, is one that can be interpreted in multiple ways. So let’s first explore the more traditional interpretation, the one that the author of this gospel is suggesting. We don’t know who actually wrote the gospel but we will call him Matthew for tradition’s sake. In Matthew’s interpretation, we are to take the parable as an allegory, where the wealthy landowner is God or Christ and the workers are the followers of Jesus.

The landowner, has gone on a long journey and has entrusted to his workers large sums of money. Now in this translation, we read about thousands of dollars. But other translations of the Bible use the term talents. And a talent in the Middle

East, in the first century, was a huge sum of money. It was worth fifteen to twenty years of a peasant's labour. So in today's terms, if we assumed a person was earning minimum wage (currently \$14/hour in Saskatchewan) and worked 40 hours a week, then in 15 years they would earn over four hundred thousand dollars! The first worker received 5 times that amount or over two million dollars! Let's just say it was a lot of money!

Of course, when we consider this parable as an allegory, then the money is interpreted as more than just wealth. It can be seen as any gift or talent that Jesus' followers, that we, may have been given. It could be the gift of preaching, teaching, strength or agility, weaving or building. It could be the gift of kindness or mercy, wisdom or knowledge. The list is endless.

When the landowner finally returns, he is very pleased with the first two workers who have traded or invested his money and doubled its value. But the third worker, the one who was given only one talent, or one thousand dollars has buried that money and can only return what he was given. He explains that he was afraid to invest the money in case he lost it. He was afraid of what the landowner would do. Well, the landowner is furious. He takes the worker's money away and gives it to the one who already has the most.

Matthew goes so far as to say that the landowner had the third worker "thrown outside into the darkness, where there is wailing and grinding of teeth." Some scholars would argue that this particular verse was added by Matthew and was never a part of the original parable. Matthew was using this line to emphasize his

apocalyptic understanding of what might happen when Christ returns. In Matthew's interpretation, the landowner represents a God that is an angry vengeful deity. This description certainly doesn't fit my belief in a God of love and mercy.

So in this interpretation of the parable, it seems that Matthew is telling the early followers of Jesus, that God wants them to use or invest the talents that they have been given. They need to use their talents even when they are afraid. They need to use those talents whether they are large or small. They need to "Go Big or Go Home." They need to risk what they have been given in order to follow their call. It's a good message. It's a message not just for those first century followers of Jesus, but also for us. We also need find the courage to use the talents we have been given.

But I'd also like to look at a second interpretation of today's parable. There are some scholars who would argue that Jesus' followers were peasants and that when he preached his parables, he was speaking to them. These scholars believe that those first century peasants would never have understood the landowner as God or Christ. They would have seen their own circumstances reflected in the story.

William Herzog is one of those scholars. He gives an interpretation of this parable that comes from the viewpoint of the oppressed, people like the Jewish peasants in Jesus' time. He suggests that the wealthy landowner would have been understood by the peasants to be a Jewish elite or one of their Roman

oppressors. That the landowner would have fit the description given by the third worker, that he was someone who was ruthless, someone who would “reap where [they] did not sow and gather where [they] did not scatter.”

To the peasants listening to Jesus’ parable, it would have been the third worker who was the bravest and the boldest because he was the one who was willing to stand up and speak the truth. Herzog calls him a “whistle-blower.” The third worker is therefore punished for speaking the truth, and not for failing to make a profit. This interpretation is also calling us “To Big or to Go Home.” It is also calling us to be like the third worker and to boldly risk. But this time it is to risk the consequences of speaking the truth, the truth about social, political and economic injustice. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parable_of_the_Talents

This interpretation also helps us to understand the second last verse where Jesus says, “In fact, to everyone who has, more will be given and then some; and from those who don’t have, even what they do have will be taken away.” This verse now becomes a statement of the reality in which the Jewish peasants were living. It also becomes a statement of the huge economic divide that has become a reality again in the 21st century. It is not a description of God’s kingdom of peace and justice, but rather a description of what needs to change in order for that kingdom to truly become a reality.

This is what makes parables so amazing. These are two very different interpretations and yet they both have important messages for us today. They are both inviting us to live our lives with courage. They are both inviting us to

have trust in a God of love and mercy. They are both encouraging us to risk boldly in order to follow God's call and live our lives to the fullest.

Those of you who read today's bulletin will have seen a short saying by William Arthur Ward. I'm going to end my reflection today by reading the poem it was taken from. The poem is called *To Risk*:

To laugh is to risk appearing a fool,
To weep is to risk appearing sentimental,
To reach out to another is to risk involvement,
To expose feelings is to risk exposing your true self,
To place your ideas and dreams before a crowd is to risk their loss,
To love is to risk not being loved in return,
To hope is to risk despair,
To try is to risk failure.

But risks must be taken because the greatest hazard in life is to risk nothing.

The person who risks nothing does nothing, has nothing, is nothing.

[They] may avoid suffering and sorrow,

But [they] cannot learn, feel, change, grow or live.

Chained by [their] servitude [they] are a slave who has forfeited all freedom.

Only a person who risks is free.