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No Fear! (Matthew 25.14–30)

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Last Sunday I attended a service in Mittagong, two hours drive from Canberra. It was a service to celebrate the ministry of Sue Dunbar, a long time member of Benedictus and for 18 years director of 'Listen into Life', a training program for spiritual directors. Sue is retiring from this ministry and we heard from students, colleagues and board members about the impact she has had on so many lives, a force for transformation and growth, and much loved. At the end of the service, Sue laid down her ministry and a new leader was commissioned to take it up. One of the readings chosen was from Frederic Buechner.

“Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery it is. In the boredom and pain of it, no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it, because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.”¹

If that is true, the invitation is to savour each moment, and to open to meaning and truth, to live the fullness.

So, with this in mind, we turn to a parable of Jesus recounted by Matthew, set a couple of days before Jesus' death. What are we to make of this confronting and perplexing story?

Scott Cowdell suggests:

All the parables are meant to challenge our conventional prudential wisdom, revealing through shock and even offence that God's love is indiscriminate, unstoppable and has nothing whatever to do with how we typically reckon our just desserts².

¹ Frederick Buechner, NOW & THEN

² Scott Cowdell https://benedictus.com.au/files/pdf/2017/november/The_Judgement_of_the_Individual.pdf

It may seem to be obvious, but from what I understand, there are varied explanations to this particular parable. The great scholarly debate about this passage is whether or not we should treat the landowner as God and if so, then Matthew may again be urging his community to increased watchfulness in a time when they believed Jesus would come again soon. But is God like that landowner? Is that what God's judgement is like? Maybe it's a cautionary tale?

The parable is set in the world of big business. The master is not a traditionalist, concerned about land, but a big investor. He is extravagant and generous with his wealth, handing it over to his slaves or servants to enjoy and do with what they will. The first and second get it, and are not cowed by this overwhelming generosity. They get him, they attend, and make more money than you can imagine.

The third is also given a generous amount, 15 years wages, the equivalent of maybe \$1 million. The master believes in him also, otherwise, why would a shrewd entrepreneur give away so much money?

Some interpreters claim the third one was the hero, not buying into unjust systems of exploitation - opting out of the market - challenging the system perhaps? But how did his way help the poor and make the world a better place?

Perhaps the third receives, but is frightened and in his traditional conservative way he buries the gift. He doesn't see that the master has given it to him to enjoy and to play with. He doesn't get it. He doesn't see the generosity, only the responsibility, and projects his fears and anxieties onto the master. Most of the parable centres around this third one, and the ending seems abrupt and harsh, 'thrown into outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth', we read.

That's what he imagined, and that's what he got, despite the earlier extravagance the master so generously lavished on him.

Maybe, what we project, is what we get? If we see God, as mean, and judging, we will find that...

Richard Rohr recounts an experiment:

A wall-eyed pike is put into an aquarium. He is fed for some days with little minnows. Then, in the middle of the experiment, a glass

partition is placed down the middle of the aquarium so that the pike is now confined to one side.

Then the researchers drop the minnows on the other side.

Immediately, the pike goes for the minnows, but he hits himself against the glass. He circles and hits it again.

He tries a third time, but he is now hitting the glass a little less hard.

After a few more times, he's just sort of nosing up against the glass.

He has a feeling he's not going to get those minnows. Pretty soon, he just swims around in circles and ignores the minnows on the other side.

At that point, those doing the experiment take out the glass. The minnows come right up against the gills of the pike and he doesn't even try to eat them.

The experiment ends when the wall-eyed pike starves to death. He's convinced he's not going to get those minnows so there's no point in wasting his time or hurting his nose again.

Rohr muses,

That is the best image of cultural blindness I have heard. I wanted to weep when I first heard it, but I realised that the experiment is about human beings, not about fish.

That's much of the human story, people spiritually starving in the midst of plenty. They don't know how to eat.³

Are we like that, spiritually starving in the midst of plenty?

Scott Cowdell sees God's judgement like this:

It's not the master who throws out the third servant. The words of condemnation at the end of the parable are best understood as words of self-condemnation, from someone who's already far from his master, who already finds himself in a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Like everyone who's trapped by such a fearful, self-regarding imagination, the curse they labour under is experienced as external,

³ *What the mystics know* Richard Rohr

but it's really internal. With their endless victimhood, complaining and litigation, such people paint an entirely different picture of their tormenter from many others whose experience is entirely different, and overwhelmingly positive.⁴

Cowdell continues:

God's judgement is best understood as the rejection of our self-deceiving, self-destructive motives, and the revealing of our lovability, our trustworthiness, our likability as God's partners in new adventures, where we can come at last to know ourselves, and to relax about ourselves.⁵

Jesus' parables turn the world on its head. There is so much more than meets the eye.

The invitation of this subversive parable, is to live, knowing we are loved unconditionally, to accept the generosity of the Divine and to live into that place of love, releasing our fears and resentment and expecting the best. And when troubles come, as they do, personal, professional and global, we sit in our contemplative heart, beloved, and knowing we can be present and engage and make a difference by who we are and the gifts we have each been given. So the work we are creating can grow, the parable of the talents encourages us to be extravagant in work and play and to let God's life-giving grace and compassion flow through us to do a power of good in our neighbourhood and beyond. The Indian poet Kahlil Gibran suggests that our work is our 'love made visible'.⁶ What a difference that makes. Perhaps part of the invitation for us is to name, nurture and encourage the gifts in others including acknowledging, affirming and protecting the gifts of earth.

Dare we allow God's love to push us into adventures beyond our imagination; investing the gifts we receive for the sake of God and the world?

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ https://benedictus.com.au/files/pdf/2017/november/The_Judgement_of_the_Individual.pdf

⁶ 'Seven Sacred Pauses' (p23) Macrina Wiederkehr

Here are some words mostly attributed to philosopher Albert Camus which I received from Kelli this week,

My dear,

In the midst of hate, I found there was, within me, an invincible love.

In the midst of tears, I found there was, within me, an invincible smile.

In the midst of chaos, I found there was, within me, an invincible calm.

I realised, through it all, that...

In the midst of winter, I found there was, within me, an invincible summer. And that makes me happy. For it says that no matter how hard the world pushes against me, within me, there's something stronger - something better, pushing right back.

Truly yours,

Albert Camus

I end as I began, with Frederic Buechner.

“Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery it is. In the boredom and pain of it, no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it, because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.”⁷

⁷ Frederick Buechner, NOW & THEN