

Ebola and Risk Taking: Matthew 25 and the Parable of the Three Slaves.

Dale Ramerman

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

The Ebola virus has been much in the news of late. Not so much the real drama of 13,000 sick and dying people in some of the poorest nations on earth, but rather the panic in the US over a few health care workers who have contracted the disease. It has not been our best moment.

I see a connection between Ebola and our parable.

A wealthy man is about to go on a trip, and gives very large sums of money, in different amounts, to three of his slaves. He returns, and finds that two of the slaves entrusted with the largest amounts had invested the owner's money and doubled what they had been given. In response the master commends them, says they have his favor and will be entrusted with more in the future. The third slave, however, out of fear of the master, buried the money entrusted to him to keep it safe. Thus he returns in full all the master had given him. The master is enraged, berating the third slave for not at least earning interest on the money, and concludes by saying, For those who have nothing, what they have will be taken from them. This worthless slave should be thrown into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Wow! Harsh, to say the least. Doesn't sound like Jesus, does it?

Parables are often read as allegories. An allegory is a story in which each character or event stands for something else. Thus, one commentary writing about our parable says the master in the story represents Jesus; the three slaves entrusted with funds represent the members of the Church; the departure of the master represent's Jesus' ascension into heaven, the master's return is Jesus' second coming, and so forth. When we plug in what each character or event stands for, the meaning of the parable is supposed to become apparent. This is a rather unimaginative way to read a parable, and for this parable leads to an astonishing view of Jesus as one who favors the rich, advocating a free-market risk taking capitalism in which the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, a Jesus who is impatient with the poor and timid and deals with them as harshly as anyone in the Bible.

Reading parables as allegories takes all the life out of parables and sometimes results in a message contrary to the Gospel, the good news of Jesus.

We're in stewardship season, and this parable is frequently used for a homily about stewardship of our talents. But the connection between the parable's use of the term "talent", and our word "talent" is remote at best. I don't think Matthew included this parable by Jesus in his gospel, knowing that 2000 years later the term "talent," which in Jesus' time meant a very large sum of money, would have evolved into meaning personal skills, gifts or resources.

In the broader sense, however, the parable is about our stewardship.

Reading our parable in its context in Matthew's gospel, we notice it is one of four

parables near the end of Matthew's gospel, each of which is framed by the approaching eschaton, the end of time. Indeed, our gospel reading next week begins, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him..." So for Matthew, and the community of followers of which he was a part, it was late in the day, the time remaining was short. What better conveys a sense of urgency, the need to act rather than to sit around resting on one's accomplishments, than the metaphor of end of time?

If we read our parable with this backdrop of great urgency, what do we hear? Well the first two servants took their master's money and did something with it. Using their best judgment and experience, they took risks. By contrast, the third servant did nothing. He buried the money and simply waited. The contrast is between those who do something, taking risks, and those who do nothing. This indeed is about our stewardship of our lives and resources. Jesus is saying, we are called to act, to get busy, to take risks, and to stop living in our comfort zone, to give up our complacency, our procrastinating ways, our leaving of what needs to be done for someone else to do. **THE WORLD IS ENDING TOMORROW!** Doesn't that get your attention?

Christ Church has a history in recent years of doing really good stuff, of working in and serving our community, of helping the poor and homeless, of partnering with the immigrants and undocumented aliens, of striving to get to know our neighbors. Perhaps the biggest step, and biggest risk, has been Total Common Ministry, at its heart an effort to take our baptismal vows to a new level. TCM is an important effort to explore how we might ready the church for a rapidly changing world in which all cultural supports for the church will evaporate, a world in which already more than half of the Episcopal Congregations are no larger than Christ Church. We are wrestling with the challenge of how the church will survive in a post-Christian world.

At Christ Church, things seem to be going well. Attendance and giving are up. We have completed a significant capital project. We are doing some great, imaginative and risk taking work in our community. But beware, **THE WORLD IS ENDING TOMORROW!** Now is not the time to sit back and relax.

The Ebola virus catastrophe can be seen as a parable of our time: a great crises, rapidly spreading, insidious, life threatening; an end of the world sort of scenario. While research on the virus is important, the most immediate need is people, people willing to care for the ill and dying, people willing to risk their own lives. Without people-doctors, nurses-medical assistants-people willing to serve in remote villages and clinics at risk to themselves, the crises will never be overcome. We cannot buy our way out of this spreading disaster; we cannot out-source the need for people. And while you and I may not be qualified to go to Africa to serve, we need to support with prayer and other actions those willing to go, especially when they return. We should welcome them as the heroes that they are, not keep them in tents at the airport like they are cattle seeking to clear customs. Politicians pandering to our irrational fears to score political points is despicable. The low point for me was the headline last week: "US now Ebola free." The headline I would like to see is something like "US sending 5000 more health workers to West Africa." Or "US welcomes 300 with Ebola." Sure there will be risks,

2

and some will return infected with Ebola. But THE WORLD IS ENDING TOMORROW. Risk taking is called for, both to serve those stricken with the disease but also new ways of strategies to care for others, including those expose or infected.

The very earliest Christian church lived in a time of the rampant spread of epidemics. In the year 165 and following, a third of the population of the Roman empire died of an epidemic; 100 years later another epidemic killed another third of the population. Many writers of that time commented on the contrast between the response of non-Christians and Christians to these epidemics. Christians, rather than fleeing to the countryside, as the non-Christians did, abandoning family and friends, stayed home and cared for the sick, both Christian and non-Christian alike. Many Christians were infected and died as a result, but by providing care such as clean bedding, food, and water, Christians more than doubled, to over 50%, the survival rate of those for whom they cared. In other words, Christians acted as if the world were ending tomorrow. In the year 362, after more epidemics, the emperor Julian launched a campaign to start pagan charities that matched the virtues of Christians. Julian in a letter complained about the “impious Galileans” as he called the Christians, “I think that when the poor happened to be neglected and overlooked by the [pagan] priests, the impious Galileans observed this and devoted themselves to benevolence...The impious Galileans support not only their poor, but ours as well; everyone can see that our people lack aid from us.”

Our times call for risk taking as well. We cannot escape Ebola by trying to isolate ourselves. The world is too interconnected. We must encourage and support in every way those willing to take the risk and serve the victims of this disaster. And we cannot satisfy Jesus' urgent call to act in our own community by merely opening our checkbooks. Sure we need to support our faith community financially, but much more urgent is to press forward with our work in our community. Now is not the time to sit back, reflect about what we have done and become nostalgic about the church and the world of the past. We must redouble our efforts. It is not about what we have done, it is what we will do today and tomorrow, whether we will live out the Gospel in our lives. We need to continue to act as if THE WORLD IS ENDING TOMORROW, and not bury or hide what God has entrusted to us.

Amen

Dale Ramerman, Christ Episcopal Church, Anacortes, November 16, 2014

