

The Book of Judges is formed around a covenant theology that exposes the difficulties when the people abandon their side of the bargain and fall into chaos. The stories revolve around sin and punishment, obedience and blessing. Despite their many failings and disobedience, God has not forgotten the people and works with judges, or special deliverers, who rescue and recall the people of God. These tales of judges may have circulated separately in oral form for some considerable time before being formed as a book of similar stories of disaster and rescue.

Judges 4.1-7 The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, after Ehud died. So the LORD sold them into the hand of King Jabin of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor; the commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-ha-goiim. Then the Israelites cried out to the LORD for help; for he had nine hundred chariots of iron, and had oppressed the Israelites cruelly for twenty years.

At that time Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel. She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites came up to her for judgement. She sent and summoned Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, “The LORD, the God of Israel, commands you, “Go, take position at Mount Tabor, bringing ten thousand from the tribe of Naphtali and the tribe of Zebulun. I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin’s army, to meet you by the Wadi Kishon with his chariots and his troops; and I will give him into your hand.” ’

Psalm 123

To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens!

As the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the LORD our God, until he has mercy upon us.

Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy upon us, for we have had more than enough of contempt.

Our soul has had more than its fill of the scorn of those who are at ease, of the contempt of the proud.

It is worth noting that the rather harsh parable of the talents does not begin with the words...’the kingdom of heaven is like this...’ but links back to vs.13, ‘for you know neither the day nor the hour.’ It is an eschatological story encouraging the listeners to live responsibly and faithfully in the absence of the master; in the time leading up to the parousia. We should not take the master as God in the story, but rather a representative of the kind of abusive master or rich owner with whom every generation is familiar. The focus is not on the master/servant relationship, but on the activity that goes on or fails to go on during the master’s absence.

Matthew 25:14-30 (The Message)

14 "It's also like a man going off on an extended trip. He called his servants together and delegated responsibilities. **15** To one he gave five thousand dollars, to another two thousand, to a third one thousand, depending on their abilities. Then he left. **16** Right off, the first servant went to work and doubled his master's investment. **17** The second did the same. **18** But the man with the single thousand dug a hole and carefully buried his master's money. **19** "After a long absence, the master of those three servants came back and settled up with them. **20** The one given five thousand dollars showed him how he had doubled his investment. **21** His master commended him: 'Good work! You did your job well. From now on be my partner.' **22** "The servant with the two thousand showed how he also had doubled his master's investment. **23** His master commended him: 'Good work! You did your job well. From now on be my partner.' **24** "The servant given one thousand said, 'Master, I know you have high standards and hate careless ways, that you demand the best and make no allowances for error. **25** I was afraid I might disappoint you, so I found a good hiding place and secured your money. Here it is, safe and sound down to the last cent.' **26** "The master was furious. 'That's a terrible way to live! It's criminal to live cautiously like that! If you knew I was after the best, why did you do less than the least?' **27** The least you could have done would have been to invest the sum with the bankers, where at least I would have gotten a little interest. **28** "'Take the thousand and give it to the one who risked the most. And get rid of this "play-it-safe" who won't go out on a limb. **29 30** Throw him out into utter darkness.'

TALENTS OF HOPE

Jeremy was finally in a position to retire – and he had determined he could do that quite comfortably. He still wanted his investments to grow but he was at a stage in life where he really just wanted freedom 55 (though he was now 62 and something of a workaholic).

He approached three investing groups known for their competency and, based on the financial record of each, he entrusted his savings portfolio to each investor proportioning his investments in 8 equal shares – five went to the first, two to the next, and the third received one... and he headed to Cuba for sun and surf.

He wanted to check how this was working out and so dropped in unexpectedly and demanded an accounting. He started with 8 equal shares and found that they had grown to 15 in a relative short time. Not a bad investment, not bad at all – actually extraordinary. It called for a celebration, and Jacob had learned something about celebrating down in Cuba while absorbing sun and sand. The

party was impressive and everyone had a great time... everyone, that is except the last investor who proved to be no investor at all.

Our worship service is focused on the theme of hope this morning, for without hope we are tempted to shrink back into ourselves and become afraid to share the little bit we have. Read our parable for today and you'll get a good idea of what form this shrinking back can take.

What future are you investing in right now? Baby boomers are crying that savings and pensions and RRSP's are rapidly losing value no matter what the investment. There doesn't seem to be a safe and sound security anywhere to be found. Noted theologian and preacher Fred Craddock said, "The major themes of the Christian faith - caring, giving, witnessing, trusting, loving, hoping - cannot be understood or lived without risk." The third investor wasn't a risk taker and maybe that was his downfall... no risk, no gain!... those who are overcautious and try to eliminate any and all risk are only deluding themselves with a false sense of control. Trying to squeeze out every possibility of risk will suck the excitement out of life.

"I can't help wondering how it would have all turned out if the first two slaves had put the money in a high-risk venture and lost it all. Jesus did not tell it that way, but I cannot but imagine that the master would not have been harsh toward them, and might even have applauded their efforts. The point here is not really about doubling your money and accumulating wealth. It's about living. It's about investing. It's about taking risks. It's about Jesus himself and what he has done and what is about to happen to him. Mostly it is about what he hopes and expects of them after he is gone. It is about being a follower of Jesus and what it means to be faithful to him, and so, finally, it is about you and me (and where we are today).

The greatest risk of all, it turns out <in the parable>, is not to risk anything, not to care deeply and profoundly enough about anything to invest deeply, to give your heart away and in the process risk everything. The greatest risk of all, it turns out, is to play it safe, to live cautiously and prudently. ... Jesus warning is that the outcome of playing safe – not caring, not risking anything – is something akin to death, like being banished to the outer darkness <where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth!>.” *

Those entrusted with the management and upkeep of this beautiful sanctuary must be saying something similar as they seek to maintain this magnificent building with what seem to be less and less resources at a time when costs and

projects to be done are soaring. In uncertain times it is hard to know how best to invest in the future ... invest in our church and the mission and ministry being carried out here. There are 'safe' things that can be done, the cosmetic things that can be done. There are the patch-up things that can be done. "... the good news of the gospel is that God's grace sustains us through all the twists and turns of our lives, both as individuals and as a church. God never abandons us; we can never be orphaned or forgotten by the Creator. The good news is that just as we have received the heritage of faith from past generations of followers of Jesus, so too we can provide those who follow us with the awareness that we are all connected – the people of God, past, present and future." Those last words were first uttered by Herb Gale when sharing the story of what planned giving can accomplish in the life of a congregation. And they are most certainly true as we reflect on the future stability of this congregation and this church. We have a few 'givens' to reflect on this morning that touch and talk about our talents (our resources if you will.) Let me quote from one of our leaders: "It happens we have a very beautiful sanctuary and a vision for mission within and without its walls..." And we take personal responsibility as we gather for workdays like we did yesterday and engage in our "painting, polishing, gardening/collaborative times of fellowship"... oh, and did I say having fun in the process? You've heard just snippets of the story of our stewardship this morning from Mac at Maintenance and Mac at Finance and Barbara at Planning and the snippets are just an indication of how concerned and committed are those to whom we entrust the hope of this congregation.

Yes, we use our time, talent and treasure to maintain our mission and ministry here in this sanctuary, and this morning's parable invites us to look at what 'resources' (what talents) we have to both maintain and enhance our ministry here on pizza corner. Now, for heaven sake, please don't automatically identify us with that one talent timid talker, the not-on-your-life penny pincher who spent his time digging holes instead of soaring on an adventure of faith. Please know without a doubt that we reflect and represent at least the two if not the five talent servant. We have been blessed with much; we have been entrusted with much – and much is expected of us. And here is a hidden truth found deep within this parable: The first two servants took a risk for the future and were willing to risk that which was given them. And that is the point, isn't it?

Jesus is telling us that we have been given talents, gifts, abilities and we should use those for the kingdom of heaven. He was saying to the third that he really

did not consider the return to be the crucial thing but the attempt, the risk, the challenge to do with what he had.

A key part of stewardship is about exploring *what* and *how* we give back to God. These gifts reflect a joyful celebration of God's generosity to us and a sign of our ongoing dependence on God. In addition to money, we can use the things we own as tools of generosity. We can open the door of our homes for hospitality. We can share our vehicles, our cooking ingredients, our tools, our knowledge, our skills, our recreation toys and our time – share with others what God has give to us.

Stewardship is about how we use all the resources. We have many ways of giving that honour God. A church exploring a comprehensive stewardship plan may help people look for practical ways to live their lives – most of which happen outside the walls of the church – in ways that accomplish God's purpose. The church may help people examine how to use time, talent and money to do God's work on this earth and to care for God's creation. The church may rediscover in the process the concept of Sabbath, and the role rest can play in living lives that honour God, or may rediscover the concept of tithing which has always been my practice and one I've never regretted. It often requires individuals and the congregation asking some tough questions about the decisions they make with their resources and how they share them with others.

Stewardship can become one of the most exciting areas of church life as we seek creative ways to help people discover how to use all their gifts to do God's work.

“Jesus invites us to be his disciples, to live our lives as fully as possible by investing in them, by risking, by expanding the horizons of our responsibilities. To be his man or woman, he says, is not so much believing ideas about him as it is following him. It is to experience renewed responsibility for the use and investment of these precious lives of ours. It is to be bold and brave, to reach high and care deeply.” *

So – bottom line – the parable is our invitation to the adventure of faith, the high risk taking venture of being a disciple of Jesus Christ.

* Quote from John M. Buchanan in *Feasting on the Word* (p. 310-312)

A MOMENT WITH THE YOUNG PEOPLE

How do you give?

There was once a father who had three sons and as he was getting older wondered which of his sons he should entrust with all that he owned. He decided to set them a test and one day gave them all an equal amount of money and pointed out a large barn to them and said I want you to use this money wisely to buy something that will fill the whole barn.

The first son took the money and bought a pile of hay, and worked day and night to fill the barn, with the large bales of hay but the money ran out and the hay ran out when the barn was only half full.

The second son took his share of money and bought a huge supply of grain and worked day and night to fill the barn but the money ran out and the grain ran out when the barn was only a quarter full.

The third soon took the money and bought five candles. He placed one in each corner of the barn and one in the centre, lit them and filled the whole barn with light. Then he gave back to his father most of the money that he had been given.

The father saw that this third son was the wisest of them all and to him he could trust all that he owned and had worked for.

Comment on the way we use the gifts we are given; do not waste them, but use them wisely and well and then tell something of the parable.