

Message for November 19, 2017
Glennon Heights Mennonite Church
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Scripture passage: Matthew 25:14-30

No laughing matter

The parables and teachings of Matthew 25 are tough. Jesus is tough. In fact, Jesus is downright hard-nosed in the parable we heard this morning. We are put off by what he says. We don't like him very much and that makes us very uncomfortable. But that's the point, I think. We're supposed to feel uncomfortable. We are supposed to be brought up short. And we are supposed to take what he says very seriously. The point of the parable is that following Jesus is important and it is demanding. Really being God's people in this world is no laughing matter.

In this parable a wealthy landowner is getting ready to go away for a while. In preparation for his departure, he distributes resources to be used in his absence. To one slave he gives five talents, to another two talents and to a third one talent. Each according to his ability, it says. Now this doesn't sound like much to our ears, but in actuality it is a lot. The talent was the largest currency in the world of Jesus' day. A single talent was equivalent to fifteen years of wages for a laborer. So this is no small gesture; it is actually a major investment. The landowner is providing substantial resources to these persons who make up his household. He obviously trusts them and expects them to do great things.

Two of these slaves, these members of the landowner's household, use their resources well. They take some risks and put their money to work. In doing so, they double the landowner's investment. When he returns, many years later, they are able to give back to him twice the amount he gave to them. With them the landowner is well

pleased.

The third slave is not a risk-taker, however. He chooses to play it safe. He doesn't want to go boldly into the unknown because he doesn't trust himself and he doesn't trust his master. So instead he hides his light under a bushel (to mix parables). He buries his treasure. He doesn't put what he has received to work. When the landowner returns, he digs up the money he had buried and apologetically returns it to the landowner intact. I was afraid, he says. This makes the landowner very angry. He has no patience with this kind of behavior. He throws this fearful slave out, penniless, into the darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

I recently finished reading a book which has helped me look at this parable in a new and challenging light. The book is entitled, Mirror to the Church: Resurrecting Faith after Genocide in Rwanda. It was written by Emmanuel Katongole, a Catholic priest who now teaches at Duke Divinity School in North Carolina. Father Katongole's parents fled as refugees from Rwanda to Uganda. That is where he grew up.

In the spring of 1994 the Hutu people of Rwanda, at the instigation of the media, rose up and began brutally killing their Tutsi friends, neighbors and fellow church members. When it was over – after 100 days of terror – 800,000 people were dead. Talk about weeping and gnashing of teeth.

This happened in a Christian country. “If you read Christian mission journals and textbooks from 1980s,” Father Katongole writes, “Rwanda is often held up as a model of evangelization in Africa. Nowhere else on the continent was Christianity so well received. ... A revival movement spread throughout Rwanda in the latter half of the 20th century,” he goes on to say. “Church growth was unprecedented. Seminarians in the

United States studied Rwanda, asking how they might use similar strategies elsewhere to share the good news of Jesus Christ. Yet in 1994 an unimaginable darkness descended on Rwanda. The most Christianized country in Africa became the site of its worst genocide.”

This happened, Father Katongole says, because the church in Rwanda practiced a Christianity without consequence, a Christianity which didn’t challenge the status quo. In fact, a Christianity which helped establish the status quo. In Rwanda in the late 19th century, the early missionaries participated in a process of organizing the society for the benefit of the colonial rulers.

In the area of Africa that is now Rwanda there have always been folks who knew they were Tutsi and folks who knew they were Hutu. These are large clan or family groups. For generations they coexisted on a relatively equal playing field. It wasn’t until the colonizers took power that things got problematic. Tutsi people, it was determined, mostly because of physical attributes, are more noble. They have more leadership potential. So they are the ones who will receive priority education and better jobs. Hutu people are less refined. They will be the laborers. They won’t need to be highly educated or given many opportunities. These distinctions were written into law and put into practice. They became the status quo, which the church never questioned. It was just the way society worked. “The stories of politics and economics form us more deeply than we usually care to admit,” Father Katongole writes. “The political and economic institutions in which we participate both demand and determine our lives.” Even the life of the church.

The failure of the church in Rwanda was in not having the courage to take risks

and be different from the society in which it lived. It was a failure to question prevailing assumptions about the way things are. A failure to stand up and say, “Enough! This dehumanizing system is wrong and we will not participate in it!” The church in Rwanda did many good things and faithful things – building schools and hospitals, feeding the hungry, caring for orphans – but always within the dictates of an unjust system. Never challenging the underlying status quo which said, Tutsis are better than Hutus. The church sought to be a good supportive civic institution. But, Father Katongole writes, “stressing the values of loyalty and responsibility does not push the church to imagine possibilities beyond those the ruling authorities name.”

This is where I see a convergence with our parable from Matthew 25. The third slave in that story, the one who received one talent and buried it in the ground, could not imagine possibilities beyond what he perceived his ruling authority to be. Instead of risking disfavor from the powers-that-be, he opted for the sure thing. He chose to not rock the boat or venture beyond what might be expected. He chose to play it safe. He thought by doing this he was protecting his treasure and himself. He couldn’t have been more wrong.

The church in Rwanda couldn’t have been more wrong, Father Katongole writes. Genocide was the result of its choice to stand with the powerful instead of the powerless. And he adds a note of prophetic caution: The church in Rwanda is not that much different than the church in other places, including in the U.S. Look in the mirror, he says. “When we look at Rwanda as a mirror to the church, it helps us realize what little consequence the biblical story has on the way we live our lives in the West. Christianity without consequence is a problem that Rwandans and Westerners share.” And this is no

laughing matter. It has and could again result in great weeping and gnashing of teeth.

So what does it mean for us to invest our treasure – the life-giving news that God really cares about those who are poor and downtrodden –so that it will bring about a great return? For us, the answer is somewhat counterintuitive. Successfully investing our treasure doesn't mean holding compelling evangelistic campaigns, though there is nothing wrong with church growth. It doesn't mean establishing award-winning programs that care for the homeless or feed the hungry, though those are good things to do. No, really investing our treasure to build God's Kingdom means realizing that we can't build anything solid on shaky ground. It means refusing to uphold systems that keep people poor and hungry. It means interrupting the status quo when it is harmful. It means being willing to follow in Jesus' footsteps to the point of risking failure or even death in order to stand with those who are hurting or in danger. In order to be able to this, we have to reimagine ourselves, Father Katongole says, and we have to reimagine what might be possible. He shares this story to help our imaginations along:

“Nyamata, Rwanda, is a marginal place,” he writes. “When I visited in 1998, I remember noting how it was surrounded by swamps and, as they say in the southern United States, ‘a million miles from nowhere.’ The road to Nyamata was terrible, even by Africa standards.

“When we were there, a survivor told me a story of how the UN had sent two armored Land Rovers over those roads in the midst of genocide. When they arrived, thousands of people were taking shelter in the local church, and two Belgian priests and one nun were scrambling to tend to their needs. Whether they knew it or not, these Westerners were keeping the killing at bay by their simple presence.

“But the Land Rovers had been sent to evacuate all expatriates, so the nun and two priests got into the vehicles and rode back to Kigali to board a plane bound for safety. After they left, the militia descended on the church compound and killed almost everyone. Eight thousand people were buried in a mass grave behind the church.

“I remember praying,” Father Katongole recalls, “as I stood outside the church at Nyamata, ‘God, is there any sign of hope in this place?’ By the side of the church I found the marker for a single grave. I was surprised to see an Italian woman’s name: Toni Locatelli. I asked our guide about the grave, and he told me Toni’s story.

“Following the 1990 invasion of Rwanda by a Tutsi-led army, local militias and the police in Nyamata began a systematic process of killing Tutsis. Toni Locatelli, an Italian social worker who had lived there for more than twenty years, alerted the international media about the sporadic but systematic killings that were going on. As a result, the international media descended on Nyamata and reported the killings. The police commander was so infuriated by the media’s presence that he shot Toni Locatelli. She was buried by the side of the church.

“The fact that Toni lies buried in Nyamata alongside other Rwandan victims of genocide is, I believe a sign of hope,” says Father Katongole. “Her presence and sacrifice redefine the concept of ‘my people.’ Like the witness of a martyr, her story announces the power of Christ’s resurrection to create a new communion beyond black and white. In a world marked by neat and settled identities that divide Christians, Toni’s story of interruption is a sign of hope. Without stories like these, we cannot begin to imagine church as a resurrected and strange communion of witnesses drawn from all tribes, nations and languages.”

What Jesus wants from us, brothers and sisters, is a willingness to take risks for the sake of the gospel. Risks that get to the heart of things. Risks that challenge the powers-that-be or the way-things-are-done for the sake of those who are being thrown aside, those who are systematically discriminated against, those who are being pitted against each other for the benefit of those in power. Jesus wants us to stand and stay with those who are at risk. He wants from us a Christianity of consequence, a Christianity that makes a real difference in the world, a Christianity that undermines the powers of darkness. Jesus wants “a church which is a resurrected and strange communion of witnesses drawn from all tribes, nations and languages.” This is no laughing matter. If we refuse, it may well be that we will find ourselves hoist by our own petard into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

This is hard stuff, I know. So let me leave you with a vision of what a Christianity of consequence looks like for it is possible. These words are from John. M. Perkins in his book, Let Justice Roll Down.

“Where there was despair, there is now hope. Where there was oppression, there is now opportunity. Where there was defeat, there is now purpose. And where there was weakness, there is now strength – that comes only from God. I face the future buoyant in the courage and confidence born of faith in Jesus Christ alone.”

May the treasure we have received through Jesus Christ our Lord be invested for the good of all the world. Amen.