

## ***Was that fair?***

A message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church  
November 19, 2023  
by Rev. Dave Le Grand

I think that it is probable that Jesus liked to provoke. He was continually bating the religious scholars of his time, comparing them to vipers. These were Jesus' colleagues!

It might be helpful to remember when Gospel stories like this one began circulating, a couple of generations after Jesus was crucified. Imagine the experience of the faithful, told that Jesus would return, but 50, 60, 70 years pass under ruthless Roman rule, their Centre of Jewish faith, the Great Temple had been destroyed by Roman after militant Jews mounted an uprising.

"When will he appear?" They asked. It could happen like a bridegroom in the middle of the night – will you have your lamp trimmed and filled and ready?

Matthew's world was in upheaval, and so now we have the parable of a taskmaster boss who hands out money to his staff, the amount he loans them depends on their ability. Well, we know how this ended. According to the market thinking today, this storyline works. No risk, no reward.

Years ago, Tracey and I wanted to look into investing some of our savings in ethical funds. I can tell you that there were not just a few people who thought this was laughable. We should at least invest in blue chip funds. You won't get a great return, but it will be solid. But looking into the ethics of funds, that will not get a return.

Isn't this the truth of investments. Ethics will cause sleepless nights when it comes to investing. So just don't look too deeply, our culture might advise us.

So also, in ancient times. Banking was an even shadier field then. So much so that, to invest was forbidden by the Hebrew Scriptures,<sup>1</sup> earning interest from the losses of a neighbour. That certainly supports the notion that Jesus was very provocative, and that he liked to make people around him uncomfortable.

Is that fair, the way the third servant is treated by the boss? I don't think so, though much of Christian tradition tends to avoid the discomfort of asking this question. One outlier Bible scholar suggested that the third servant was, in fact, the hero of the story, because they refused to participate in the unethical system of accruing interest.

I'd like to stand squarely within that line of thinking. But I'm not sure that whether or not the boss was right to treat the third servant harshly is the right question to ask, here, today. The Gospel storyteller Matthew told a series of stories including today's about staying awake, directing us to be prepared! Jesus had not returned, yet, we remember. People were wondering if he ever would. Probably more than a few people were losing their sense of expectancy, and this is an urgent concern of Matthew and the stories of Jesus telling parables.

Here we are, today, in tumultuous times fraught with, it seems, injustice, and not a lot of loving-of-neighbours going on. Ukraine invaded by a tyrant leader and the Russian

---

<sup>1</sup> See Deuteronomy chapter 23, verses 19–20, for example

army. Syrians killed by their own leader, and no justice there. Sudan is in the midst of what seems to be a horrific genocide. Palestinians fed up after decades of occupation, extremists lash out in horrific ways, but then, Israel retaliates with unimaginable wrath.

We wait. But “HOW do we wait, for justice?”

Do we tune out the din of news, or do we try to listen in that news for the murmur of God’s voice calling us to daring action? I’m tempted to just crawl into bed and hope that all is better when I wake up. Maybe that response is something like the third servant burying the gold entrusted to them. Acting out of fear.

Jesus provokes us to stay awake. To listen, to pay attention, and be ready for any and every invitation to us to use our gifts. Some of us might be blessed with financial resources, so we listen and look attentively for opportunities to contribute to a cause that touches our hearts. Some might not have a lot of money, but we enjoy volunteering, so we vigilantly keep awake to hear our call to invest our time in a meaningful cause. Not just comfortable causes, but often, I think, we feel the tug on our hearts by causes that might take a risk on our part to get involved with.

By the way. I still think that that third servant was a hero – I always admired those students in the lecture hall who annoyed everyone by challenging the professor. We need to ask questions of our Bible stories, and of one another. We need to share truthfully and lovingly, and to listen to one another attentively. Dare to believe that God’s voice is in the midst of especially the riskier conversations. Amen.