“Deliberate Ignorance”

Matt 25:14-30

November 19,2017

Everybody here has a crazy uncle, right? Not in the sense of the derogatory term of having mental illness, but as in they are unpredictable and say weird things. So I have at least a couple of crazy uncles if we go by that definition. I am sure a few of you might be labeled the crazy uncle by your nieces and nephews. Well the crazy Uncle I am thinking about today is my Uncle Bob. He married my Mom’s older sister Diane. They have seven kids. Can you imagine having that many kids. They lived on a farm outside of Green Bay until a few years ago. Much of my childhood was spent there with all of my cousins which the youngest four are somewhat near to my age. I always thought that Diane’s marriage to Bob was an interesting one. He is very very very conservative while Aunt Diane is somewhat liberal. Despite that difference, it works well. When Bob got onto facebook a couple of years ago, that made things interesting. Just seeing the stuff he posts makes me shake my head. Any family gathering we have over the years we have to try and keep my Mom and Uncle Bob separated so they don’t get into a long drawn out political argument.

One Sunday my brother and I drove over to the farm as we were on our way to a packer game. We parked there for a friend to pick us up to go over to lambeau field. After the victory we came back to pick up the car and to hang out with them a little bit. Uncle Bob tried to pick an argument with me over climate change. Somehow I was able to deflect that one. Later on we were talking about some issue I had going on, and I said hopefully it will go away on it’s own. Bob came up with a little bit of wisdom. He said, Kevin if you ignore it, its not going to go away. That is what is called deliberate ignorance. You know the problem, perhaps you know the way to fix it, but you just ignore it. That is how conflict approaches us sometimes. We don’t want to deal with it and hope it just goes away. Most of the time it festers. Maybe it gets worse.

Deliberate ignorance might be a good title for our parable for today. This is going to be our last parable for awhile. Whew! We have been talking about these for some time now. I wish these were easy. I wish these were step by step lists on how to live our Christian lives. It would be nice to know exactly what we are supposed to do. It would be nice if it was black or white. As with most of scripture that is not what we get. God’s word calls us to think. To use the brains that God has given us. These parables are conversation starters.

Jesus is still on the mountain sitting teaching his disciples in private. The question that begun this series was, “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” He tells the parable from last week where the five moron bridesmaids and the five wise bridesmaids wait for the groom. The five morons didn’t get into the wedding. It doesn’t sound that bad, they just didn’t get in. The guy who doesn’t do what he is supposed to in this parable gets punished severely.

For it is as if a man, going on a journey summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. The master goes away. The guy who received five talents went off right away and traded with them and made five more talents. The guy who received two talents went out and made two more. But the guy who had one talents took it, dug a hole and hid it in the ground. We could stop right there. It could be the beginning of a great stewardship sermon. That is what I was hoping this passage could speak to. This is stewardship season after all. The time of year when we evaluate how much money we should give to God and to the church. Get your pledge cards ready everyone. Money is such a hard thing to talk about, and I myself am skittish on talking about it. But it is a reality. The church needs money to keep the building in good shape, to operate our food pantry, to pay my salary and all sorts of other things. It is just what is required. So I hope you will give generously. If we read the parable only up to this point, then this passage is about stewardship. Use what has been given to you to make more. Be good stewards of what you have. Don’t be like the guy and hide your money in the ground. Sermon over.

However, the passage is not done so either am I. Maybe these slaves didn’t think the master would actually come back. Let’s take our talents and make some more. Remember a talent is a ridiculous some of money. A talent is fifteen year’s worth of a laborers wage. So to trust a slave with this amount of money is a huge amount of trust. What are they going to do with it? The first two slaves take a huge risk. To invest it. They get a 100% return. It must have been a very risky investment and it pulled off. What if it didn’t. The other guy put it in the ground. It will be safe here at least. Maybe I’ll get to keep it. But if he does come back, then he doesn’t deserve any more.

He does come back. As he is coming over the hill, the slaves may have been thinking, oh crap. I thought we were going to get away with this. The master was away for a long time, doesn’t say how long. He is back and he still owns these guys. So he approaches the guy who was given the five talents. Master, look what I did, you gave me five talents, see I have made five more talents. Well done good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master. Then the guy who was given two talents came forward. Master, look what I did, you handed me over two talents, see, I have made two more talents. Well done good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things, enter the joy of your master. Then comes the third servant. Master I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter seed. So I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours. Naturally the master was not happy. You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. Give this talent to the slave with the ten. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance, but from those who have nothing, even what they have shall be taken away. And for you worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. There it is again.

This parable is a beast. A lot going on here. We are looking for the parabolic problem, which is the issue in society that this parable focuses on and that presents a challenge. All of these parables are looking at concrete social situations. What is the issue here? Laziness of the third slave? Fear? Fear is one answer. The slave buried his talent underground because that is where it would be safe. The money would still be there. The other two slaves took extraordinary risks. They went and engaged in high risk investments. They had little fear and went outside of their comfort zones. Because of their huge risk they were rewarded with much responsibility. These guys had the opportunity to make something of what they had been given. They were fearless just as Jesus had been fearless in coming to Jerusalem. Jesus knew that was a high-risk venture that would eventually lead to his death. Just as Jesus overcame fear as should we. We are not called to be lukewarm Christians.

Let’s look at this parable in a slightly different way. Many interpretations say to look at the first two slaves as the heroes. Could the third slave actually be the hero? The first two slaves had to go out and find a way to make such a huge return on their investment. One possible way that they did this was through a system of exploitative crop loans. They charged peasants ridiculous interest and would foreclose on them when they were not able to be paid back. The first two gained their money by exploitation. They were ancient middle eastern pay day lenders. The third slave did not want to participate in this exploitation. So he was a whistleblower of sorts. The first two slaves were rewarded because they were trustworthy in a few things. FEW! This was years and years and years worth of salary. The master thinks that is a trifling little bit of money. They were being rewarded for making more money for him.

The third slave is very different. He shows defiance by painting the master of one who reaps where he did not sow and gathers where he didn’t scatter seed. Basically accusing him of being an absentee landlord who bleeds the land dry. So I was afraid and buried it in the ground. What was he afraid of? The master’s harshness? Traditionally yes, he was afraid of taking a risk and investing it. But, it could be said that he was more afraid of God. He did not want to take part in that pay day lending scheme and as a God fearing person he hid it in the ground. In the ancient world if you bury money upon receipt you were not held liable if something happens to it.

The master does not refute being called harsh. The third slave is labeled wicked because he challenged him. This master is NOT God in this story. In either interpretation. Perhaps we can interpret For to all those who have, more will be given and they will have abundance; but from those who have nothing even what they have will be taken away, in a different way. If a merchant possessing capital reports a profit, people eagerly offer him further capital, while the trader who reports no profit loses the capital entrusted to him.

Two very different ways to interpret the parable. Either a fearful slave, worried about losing the investment or as a whistleblowing slave. Are either the true way to tell the story? We will never know. But they both hang on fear. Fear of risk. Fear of putting yourself in harms way. Fear of speaking up.

We have seen what happens after the fear of speaking up can be overcome. When I was in seminary we had a Christian Ethics class. We were assigned a book by the theologian John Howard Yoder from Notre Dame. He wrote about the politics of Jesus. While reading it, I thought it was a very good and provocative book. We were eventually informed by the professor that Yoder had been accused of sexual assault by a secretary. He had also been harassing several other women. Should the book be pitched in the trash? That was my immediate thought. Now we have a recent outpouring of accusations against Harvey Weinstein, Kevin Spacey, Louis CK, George Takai and more. If something comes out about Tom Hanks, I will lose it. They just keep coming, Him too? Its horrible. People have been covering up for these guys for years. Finally someone said something. It is ugly. Some of these revered actors and producers have been using their power to abuse and harass women. Just sickening. Like our parable for today, being deliberately ignorant won’t help things go away. Confronting the problem and speaking up is necessary.

One of the hardest doctrines of John Calvin’s theology is total depravity. It is hard to think about. It just feels awful to tell people that they are depraved. For we are all created good and in the image of God. We all try to live good lives and do the best we can. But all the time we are confronted with horrors. We all have a taint of cruelty in us. But we should respond by having checks and balances in place. Creating space for victims to tell their stories. We should welcome transformation and reconciliation. The light needs to be shined on our problems.

As we see with our parable for this week, there are so many ways to see a piece of scripture. In this case it can be a primer on how to be a good steward. It can also show the power of defiance and whistleblowing. Most of all it is about overcoming fear, taking risks for the sake of the kingdom. Being a Christian is not being lukewarm. Take risks, try something new. What risk will you take? Amen.