

November 15th, 2020

Matthew 25:14-30 “A Tale of Three Investors” (Based on a story by Alison Sampson)

I want to share a modern day parable with you this morning based on a story by Alison Sampson, an Australian minister who belongs to the South Yarra Baptist Church where our Laughing Bird Psalms come from. I've taken the story and adapted it for our time and place in history as well as our cultural context here in the states.

Once upon a time, there was a billionaire. 2019 was a brutal year for him, and 2020 came in with a vengeance with a global pandemic that made the stock market even more unstable. So he decided he needed a break. He needed some “me time” to get away from all the craziness. But before he went away, he called in his chief investors. They met in the board room on the top floor of his skyscraper. In that room, he turned to the first investor and gave him five million dollars to invest as he saw fit. He turned to the second, and gave her two million dollars to invest. He turned to the third investor, and gave him a million dollars. He said, “I trust you'll know what to do with this. Don't disappoint me.” Then he set off to go find an island somewhere off the East coast of Africa to hide out until the pandemic was over.

Now, the first investor was a real wheeler and dealer. Thanks to his timely donations to major political parties, environmental controls were relaxed. Companies began extracting oil from the tar sands in Alaska and started fracking near schools in Pennsylvania, and selling brown coal to China. His energy investments shot through the roof. Thanks to his canny lobbying, governments were locked into contracts which guaranteed profits for energy companies; and so despite a downturn in domestic usage, he continued to profit. Thanks to his careful political maneuvering against wind farms and solar panels, small energy producers were driven out of the market, and so in this way, too, his investments in big energy continued to pay excellent dividends. And

thanks to his creative approach to tax law, he was able to send all profits offshore without having to pay corporate taxes. Over time, he doubled his investment, and he made another five million dollars.

The second investor put her money into manufacturing. Since the relaxation of import tariffs and the migration of work to special economic zones, her investments had been performing well. In Cambodia, when workers fainted and even died from exhaustion, there were always other workers willing to take their place. In Bangladesh, when one factory collapsed and killed a few hundred workers, another factory and another few hundred workers took their place. In China and Guatemala and India and Mexico, floods of workers made t-shirts and jeans and sneakers and smartphones for less than a dollar a day; and the branded products were sold to Western nations at terrific profits. Her judicious approach to investment soon paid off. Within a few months, she too had doubled her money, and made another two million dollars.

The third investor? Well, he was afraid. He was a man of the world; he knew how money was made. As a young man, energetic, ambitious, he had done very well for himself. But something had changed. He continued to invest by day, but with an increasing sense of unease. And at night, well, at night he was haunted. He would wake up and hear the groans of those who had worked all day all week all month all year, and were still hungry, and poor, and miserable. In the mornings, when he checked his portfolio, he found himself thinking of the garment workers in Indonesia, and the tomato pickers in California, and cobalt miners in the Congo who died while extracting the elements we need to make components for our cell phones and electric cars. All of these people who work, work, worked for other people's gain. No matter how hard he tried to suppress them, the groans of the people haunted him, and the words of the prophet Isaiah kept coming to mind:

They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their own fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a

tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain... (Isaiah 65:21-23a)

When he received the one million dollars from his boss, he felt sick. He thought back to the global financial crisis. His boss had taken a government bailout, and used it to award himself a forty million dollar bonus. Meanwhile, he had let thousands of workers go, and foreclosed on hundreds of thousands of homes.

Only last week, while being driven to a meeting, the investor had glanced up from his smartphone and noticed tents on land zoned for redevelopment. Children were playing among the broken bottles and pizza boxes, the used condoms and syringes, and he realized this was their home. In that moment, a fragment from the Torah had come to mind: 'For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them with food and clothing.' (Deut 10:18). And he became nauseated.

He thought about his boss - a man who spent time on his yacht while his staff worked ninety hour weeks; a man who pushed down wages and cut costs at every turn; a man who undermined or ignored environmental and workplace safety laws; a man who took government handouts but hardly paid any taxes. He thought of the times when his boss had been angry and screamed obscenities at his staff; he remembered watching the spit fly as he called them slackers, and boneheads, and losers, and worse. And he wondered, why do I work for him?

He thought of the work itself. He was tired of being on the treadmill, slaving at the office all day and wining and dining clients all night. He hated the person he was becoming – ruthless like his boss, cruel to his underlings, merciless in his investments, seeking only money, status,

power. Yet no matter how hard he worked, he never seemed to have enough. He was never satisfied. And he wondered, why am I so hungry?

He thought of his wife. He was tired of the spending: the houses, the holidays, the fancy food and drink, the haircuts, the jewelry, the latest smartphones, all the stuff that seemed to be taking over their lives. And he wondered, is this the only way to live?

But what else could he do? He knew how to be an investor. If he left this work, this career, how would he pay for the mortgage and the holiday house, the nice suits, the leather shoes, the overseas vacations? What would he eat? Where would he live? What would his wife say, or their neighbors, or their friends? And how would the boss react?

His head was spinning; his stomach churned. He felt weighed down by responsibilities, and sick at heart. Unable to think straight, he stood up. He left the office and went for a walk. Walking was where he often found peace. He paid no attention to where he was going; he let his feet guide him.

Eventually, he wound up on the other side of town, near the lake. And at the barbecue area he saw a ragtag bunch, a mob of tired women and snotty children, and hoboes with straggly hair. And they were all listening, listening to a storyteller. As he came near, he heard the storyteller say,

‘You cannot serve two masters; for a slave will either hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth. Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Isn’t life about more than food, and the body more than clothing?’ (Matt 6:24ff)

The man paused. The words were oddly comforting. And as he paused the storyteller looked up, and their eyes met. In that instant, all the love in the world poured into his soul. But it was too much. His eyes filled

with tears as he rocked back. Then he turned on his heel, shook his head once, and walked home.

That night in bed, he tossed and turned. He punched his feather pillows, he twisted in his linen sheets, he adjusted his silk pajamas, trying to get comfortable. But the problem was not the bed. He was being kept awake by thoughts, by a self at war with itself, by questions which spun round and round: ‘Who is my master?’ he asked himself. ‘What do I serve?’

He tossed and turned and wondered and argued; and as dawn broke, things became clear. He rose, showered, and dressed with a strange sense of calm; then he went to the office. And there he arranged to remove his master’s money from the stock market. And he took the money, and put it in a safe-deposit box, and hid away the key.

A great weight lifted off him; and he realized there was nothing he needed to do. With the money locked away, he did not need to manage it. He did not need to watch the stock market or keep an eye on his investments or read the financial news. He looked around the office, at his colleagues staring into their screens, their foreheads frowning anxiously; shouting into their phones, red-faced and panicky; checking their accounts, eyes glittering with greed.

He looked around, and shook his head once; and then he walked out. He went to his house, so quiet in the middle of the day. He kicked off his nice shoes, and he took off his tasteful suit, and he left his watch with his keys and his smartphone on the nightstand. He pulled on his old gardening shorts, a ratty t-shirt, and battered old sneakers. He left the house and headed to the other side of town, where the other side of us all live. He walked among the homeless and the hookers, the addicts and the drop outs, the alcoholics and the asylum seekers. He walked among the chronically ill and the chronically unemployed and the chronically convicted, and as he walked he looked. And he hummed to himself as he went walking and looking, a man in search of the storyteller.