

WEALTH MANAGEMENT
Judges 4: 1-7; Matthew 25: 14-30
25th Sunday after Pentecost • November 19, 2023
by Pat Berger

Today's is the only reading from the Book of the Judges that is included in the lectionary, and since the reading doesn't begin at the beginning, here is a bit of background. In his commentary, Marion Soards outlines the stories in the book of Judges this way: 1) Israel sins, 2) God judges or punishes Israel by having a nearby nation threaten them, 3) Israel cries for help, and 4) God provides help in the form of a judge (so this is before the Hebrew people had kings). God had commanded the Israelites to defeat all of the tribes of Canaan, and they did not do that; instead, now and again they took the safe way out, and made friends with some of the nations. Their way of saying "thank you" to God for all that God had done for them was: not following divine directions.

God had got them out of Egypt and slavery, had provided for them during 40 years in the desert, had helped them as they settled into the Promised Land. Land, descendants, blessings – all the things God had promised them -- and what did they do with all of this, with this wealth? They made deals with the locals; they gave their wealth away, because it was a safer option. Then God would punish them; then the people would cry to God for help; then the God who loves the people so much that the beloved children are never abandoned – never abandoned – that God sends to the people a savior, in this case a woman, Deborah, a prophet and a wife, to be a judge for them. In this story, and in most of the verses where we read about Deborah, she is a hero. For instance, in verses 8 and 9, right after what Sharon read for us, Barak says that he will certainly go to war – but if and only if Deborah goes with him. Apparently, she doesn't even hesitate: "I will surely go with you . . ." she says. Therein lies her heroism: her wealth, her use of God's gifts to her, shows itself in her seemingly not thinking about the danger she may encounter, or any other difficulty; she just goes.

We can begin to see how this reading might tie in with our story from Matthew's gospel. The writer of Matthew has us listen in as Jesus tells his disciples this story about a very generous, very wealthy man. This man is headed out of town for a while which somehow leads him to entrust huge sums of money to three of his slaves. It is possible that this wealthy man is supposed to make us think of God – we aren't told that – and since our God is a God of abundance, this spreading of wealth would be no surprise: we have been given an abundance of life, and an abundance of all that is required to maintain our lives. Here, even the slave who received the least of the wealth was given the equivalent of wages for 12,000 days of full-time work – that is over 30 years of wages, in a time when most people didn't live long enough to work that long! And even that smallest amount mentioned would have weighed about 75 pounds, which would have made it difficult for one person to carry. Another slave received two times that amount, and the third received five times that amount. All of these slaves are now potentially quite wealthy people. Jesus doesn't put this detail into his story, but it is clear that the slaves don't treat these funds as gifts – rather, they think of them as amounts of money for which they will be held responsible.

As soon as the landowner comes back to town, they all get back together again and settle accounts. The two men with larger amounts had each doubled their money, and when they gave the money back to the wealthy man, they were promised more wealth, and the opportunity to "enter into the joy" of the master. The third man had buried his money – which was not an unusual thing to do in a time when not many banks were available, and few people used the banks that there were; he buried the money. This was a safe thing to do – but certainly guaranteed that the amount of money was not doubled. It also seems to have assured that that slave would not be entering into the master's joy. As anyone who invests in anything knows, investing does not ensure that one will double one's funds. Some might think that the two who invested "got lucky;" no doubt the third slave would agree.

One of the commentators this week told readers that most important about this story is that it is not about money! Jesus told this story when the risks were quite high in his own life. These were the last few days of his life. He had made a decision not to do the safe thing, which would have been to stay in Galilee; he was going to Jerusalem. He was going to do what God had asked of him, what he had been equipped to do – he was going to use his God-given wealth wisely. The Romans and the religious authorities in that city were not happy with him. We know, as Jesus' first listeners did not, that the risk Jesus took also led to a burying. And – we can rejoice as we tell the story – on the third day, he rose again from the dead, and sits at the right hand of God the Father almighty.

God's joy is simply that we try. Our wealth is in the gifts that God has given each and every one of us; God would like for us to put those gifts, our faith, into action. Will we always make the right choice? Not likely. We have been given lives to be lived for the Kingdom, and goods to be used for the Kingdom. What is the most valuable gift that God has given you? What is the most valuable gift that God has given this congregation? How do we respond to that wealth? Do we bury it, or do we take risks and invest? The greatest risk, it would seem, is not to care enough to take a risk. Those things that our faith asks of us are not free of risks; when we care, and give, and witness, when we trust, and love, and hope – we can't always do these things faithfully and avoid taking risks. John Buchanan writes in his commentary,

Here Jesus invites us to be his disciples, to live our lives as fully as possible by investing them, by risking, by expanding the horizons of our responsibilities. To be his man or his 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 the parable is the invitation to the adventure of faith: the high-risk venture of being a disciple of Jesus Christ.

We have been invited; how will we RSVP?
Let us pray.