August 23rd, 2020

Springfield Presbyterian Church

I’m Not Even Sure Anymore What Season We Are In.

The 166th Day of March

**The Economy of Blessing**

1. Economic Dilemmas

Let me say from the beginning: I am no economic expert. But even without that education, I think there’s some pretty clear economic issues that evolve into social issues in our passage this morning. We see the master, who we are not claiming as Jesus here, giving money to his slaves due to their ability. While he does not say he is seeking return and interest, it’s clear later on that is what he wanted from his slaves. Those who give him interest are celebrated, and the one who doesn’t is put into the outer darkness. On the face, if you look at this parable from a checks and balances perspective, it makes sense, but I hope as you read it, as I read it myself, it stirs something up within you that challenges and confronts the way in which people and money have a skewed relationship.

II. Master and Slave

I will jump right away to the major conflict I see in this parable, which plays out constantly within our own culture.

The slave, the one who had the very least knew that what his master was doing was wrong. He knew that he was reaping what he was not sowing – or in other words, he was stealing. His business ethics are repulsive. And yet, when we start to explore our own culture and where we purchase our goods from, when we do some investigating, we find some of that trickery involved in our world. There’s always a way to negotiate the system, and some see it as sin while other see it as advanced business practices. For instance, if I put my subsidiaries offshore, I do not have to pay tax. Well, that’s not inherently bad, but I get to have the business everyone else does and not have to pay into the system.

There’s many things that businesses do right and many they do wrong, and it is our Christian responsibility to be mindful and engage in learning good business practices so we can ensure that we are supporting those individuals and companies that are working fairly.

I’m in awe though of the strength and courage that the slave had to go up to his boss and speak frankly about what he saw. He was the one who had the most to lose, and yet he still spoke up. I think this is a human who had great integrity and bravery to speak truth to power.

Now, the unfortunate part of the story is that the master does not say, “You know, you’re right, I learned my lesson, I’ve got to turn from my wild ways and settle into good business practices.” Uh, no. Instead, the master confronts him and calls him lazy and worthless and casts him out into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

So, how is this an encouragement for you or me to do the right thing, to speak truth to power, when we see this narrative play out? While I wish the master changed his ways, his actual response is probably more truthful to what we see today. Maybe the entire point is that we are called to speak truth to power, even though it is difficult, even though we could be called terrible names, even though we could face consequences that are at the very least frustrating to downright humiliating. Sometimes, oftentimes, the right thing and the hard thing are the same.

II. The Economy of Blessing

If I’m really honest, soul grippingly honest, I don’t know if I would the courage to speak out about this master. I know I should, I know that’s the call, but it seems incredibly difficult. It makes me wonder more about what I’m called to speak out against, the powers in our world and my world that diminish God’s love for all people. Even if I receive a sour response, I still have to speak.

One of the ways I’m learning more about this is through participating in a class right now that is examining Matthew 25 through the lens of White Supremacy and Racism. One of the questions that has been posed this week is how we are called to make economic choices that dismantle white supremacy and racism. The class participants are mostly retired elders, and I’ve had the honor to hear some of their stories – for they lived in the world of the first civil rights fight. They’ve seen history play out in front of their eyes, they’ve been part of history, and alongside voices of Black, Indigenous, People of Color – these are the voices of elders I need to hear to know how to act.

One of the elders I heard from this past week shared her story openly. She shared that she went with her sister to the community pool and all of the black people had to present a ‘health certificate’ to go swimming, but white people didn’t. She knew it was wrong, but she didn’t know what to do. Who was she to speak up? If she spoke up would things have changed? Maybe, maybe not, but it’s a story that sticks with her today.

And it was not only racial, it was economic – to get a health certificate required a doctor’s visit, it required a doctor’s certificate – and the use of that money might be a means to prevent black folks from entering the pool. When you put up barriers, even those that seem small, the effects are long lasting and speak to the core of what matters to you and in your world.

I shared with my group what I saw today that was concerning me – I saw essential workers, who were often folks in vulnerable minorities, being exposed to a deadly virus. They were essential, they are essential – but they are not treated or paid as essential. The risk of illness and death for the virus jumps significantly if you are in the minority, and as I sit in my white body, safe at home and behind a computer screen, I’m becoming more and more aware of what means to be essential.

1. Regret

The parable this morning shows us the pattern repeating – the richer becoming richer and the poorer becoming poorer, the dangers that face the most vulnerable if they speak up, and unethical business practices. This is a reality we still live in today. The parable is a lesson about human nature and a lesson on how to act and how not to act.

Let the parable teach it what it needs to teach you today. If you feel the call to speak up for the most vulnerable, then speak, speak proudly and bravely and with the knowledge that the Spirit secures you. If you need to look at your bank account and where you’ve been spending money and readjust where you put your money based upon good business practices, then go and educate yourself and make some tangible changes. If you need to enter into conversations with folks about how the economy favours the white over black, indigenous, and people of color – how those who are vulnerable are made more vulnerable, then this is the moment.

May you go into this world, to speak boldly, to reflect on your own status, and to make tangible changes in how you operate in this world economically. And may you know that being blessed is not predicated upon our economic ties, our race, or anything else -- it is not what we have, it is who we are and it is whose we are that blesses us. So may you live in that blessing and bless others, through the hearing of this Word. Amen.