Context is Everything

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Luke 19:11-27

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Context is everything. Separate a word or phrase from its original context and you distort its meaning. Take the slogan, “My country, right or wrong.” We attribute the quote to naval officer Stephen Decatur dating back to 1816. He spoke it as part of an after-dinner toast in Norfolk, VA. His actual words communicate a different context than the one to which we commonly associate it, “Our country—in her intercourse with foreign relations may she always be right but right or wrong, our country.” His toast was not a call to blind patriotism, but wisdom and temperance in negotiating with foreign governments. His intent is reflected in the qualifying phrase, “May she always be in the right.”

U.S. Senator Carl Schurz captured the spirit of what Decatur intended in an 1872 speech to Congress, “My country, right or wrong. If right, to be kept right and if wrong, to be set right.”

Another popular phrase often taken out of context comes to mind. It’s the phrase, “Winning isn’t everything; it’s the only thing,” attributable to legendary football coach Vince Lombardi. While he is not the originator of the quote, he is the one who made it famous. Lombardi rued the day when he became linked with the quote. He argued that his words were taken out of context. Lombardi wanted to win but win in the right way. Thereafter, Lombardi altered the quote this way, “Winning isn’t everything, but the effort to win is the only thing.”
Context is everything where the Bible is concerned. My seminary professors taught me, “A text without a context is a pretext for a proof text.” In other words, you can distort the meaning of any Biblical word or phrase by divorcing it from its wider context.

Sam Harris is a neuroscientist, one of the so-called “new atheists” who have been vocal critics of Jesus and his followers. Harris claims that Jesus orders his followers to kill unbelievers based on the last verse of today’s Scripture reading, “Bring my enemies before me and slay them” (19:27).

Sam should stick to neuroscience. Jesus did not intend his parables to be taken literally. His parables function as short stories designed to leave an immediate impact on his listeners. The point of his parable is not that his followers should take out unbelievers. Everything about Jesus’ ministry argues to the contrary.

Context is everything with regard to this parable. There are reasons why Jesus tells this parable where and when he does. Luke identifies two reasons in the run-up to this parable.

First reason: “Jesus went on to tell this parable because he was near Jerusalem” (19:11). We find ourselves situated in a section of Luke’s gospel called Jesus’ travel narratives. The middle portion of Luke’s gospel functions much like a travel log—ten chapters worth of Jesus’ teaching spoken over a span of five days.

We can illustrate their journey on a map. Jesus and his disciples are on a journey from Galilee in the north to Jerusalem in the south. They are nearing the end of their
travels—only 17 miles outside of Jerusalem. The next story in Luke’s gospel chronicles Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

Second reason: “Jesus went on to tell this parable because he was near Jerusalem and the people thought the kingdom of God was going to appear at once (19:11). Jesus has just concluded a conversation with Zacchaeus in which he says, “Today, salvation has come to your house” (19:10). Messianic expectations are running high. It makes sense to the disciples that Jesus will enter Jerusalem to inaugurate his kingdom. He will take his rightful place as heir to the throne of David. Jesus will restore the kingdom to Israel and free Israel from Roman rule. Context is everything.

In Luke 19, Jesus’ parable centers on a man of noble birth who travels to a distant country to receive his appointment as king (19:12). Before he leaves, he gives ten servants one mina each “to do business for him until he returns” (19:13). A mina was a Greek coin amounting to three months’ worth of wages for a common laborer.

Some of the people who will become subjects in this nobleman’s kingdom hate him. They send a delegation to lobby against his appointment as king. They are unsuccessful and the nobleman returns as the newly chosen king.
Two servants report a positive return on investment to their master. One servant reports a tenfold increase—ten minas on top of one mina. The other testifies to a fivefold increase—five on top of five.

“Well done,” the nobleman exclaims (21:17). The reward for these efforts surpasses their wildest dreams—ten cities in exchange for ten minas and five cities in exchange for five minas.

It’s a much different outcome for the third servant. He produces the original mina wrapped in a handkerchief, having effectively taken it out of circulation. He justifies his close-to-the-vest approach, “I was afraid of you because you are a hard man” (19:21).

The master effectively calls his bluff in the words that follow: ‘If you knew me to be a hard man, why didn’t you at least open an interest-bearing savings account yielding two-and-a-quarter percent, insured by the F.D.I.C?’

The nobleman takes the single mina away from this third servant and gives it to the one who already has ten minas. Jesus closes the parable this way: “I tell you to everyone who has, more will be given but for the one who has nothing, even what he has will be taken away” (19:26). Eugene Peterson translates this verse in The Message. “Risk your life
and get more than you ever dream of. Play it safe and end up holding the bag."

If you haven’t figured it out by now, Jesus resembles the nobleman in our story. He travels to a faraway land to receive his kingdom. His kingdom will not come by any razzle-dazzle heroics but by his death on a cross. His death will serve as a substitute for our sin and rebellion. God will raise him to life again and he will reign at God’s right hand. In the interim before he returns to establish God’s kingdom on earth, he directs his subjects “to do business for him” (19:13).

So what? So what difference does this sermon make in my life?

Everything in this parable turns on the phase “Do business for me until I return” (19:13). Jesus contrasts what is gained (19:15) and earned (19:16-17) by the first two servants with what the third servant squanders (19:20). There is grace for people who invest wisely in the kingdom of God and judgment for those who don’t even try.

The payout in this parable for the two servants’ investments is over the top. Ten cities for ten minas and five cities for five minas. God is not prudent or miserly about showing generosity to people. God lavishes grace on people who invest in His kingdom.

This third servant justifies his do-nothing approach with the words, “I was afraid of you because you are a hard man” (19:21). He decides to do nothing based on some imaginary fear. He resolves to be more afraid of his master than to take risks with the resources entrusted to him.
The nobleman’s relationship with his servants centers on trust. His only stated expectation is that they do business for him. He never makes it a requirement that they make money for him. The excess of caution shown by the third servant is out of proportion to what the master asks of him.

The servant in this parable judged most severely is the one who would not even try. He decides to play it safe. He’s overly cautious. Being overly cautious is a horrible way to live.

I recall a survey from a few years ago directed to people 95 and older in our country. They were asked one question, “If you had to live your life over again, what would you do differently?” These senior citizens said three things. First, they would invest more in things that would outlast them. Second, they would give more thought and reflection to establish priorities in their use of time and money. Third, they would risk more and take more chances. Let me repeat. They would invest in things that would outlast them, reflect more and risk more.

Let me apply this message to the events of this past weekend. Many of you watched the royal wedding yesterday. Americans are obsessed with British royalty. Could it correlate to our historical tie with the British monarchy? Maybe the wedding offers a welcome respite from the turbulent news of our day, a break from partisan politics on our shores. Maybe we can’t resist a real live fairy tale with a modern twist, a bi-racial American actress marrying a British prince.
Earthly monarchies come and go yet God’s kingdom endures forever. Our ultimate allegiance as followers of Christ is to Jesus as King (Lord). We serve as his loyal subjects. In this parable he calls us to invest in his kingdom.

This weekend, some of us have been impacted by the sudden death of a young woman, Margaret Wright, active in our church, who celebrated her 23rd birthday last week. She died from an epileptic seizure. Rarely have I met someone so young who invested her life in the kingdom of God.

How about you? When you come to the end of your life and the question is on the table, “how did you live your life?” I hope and pray you will be able to say more than, “I played it safe.”

Don’t play it safe. Invest your time and money in God’s kingdom purposes.