

EXPAND YOUR HORIZONS

Matthew 25:14-30
The 23rd Sunday after Pentecost
November 16, 2014
All Saints', Atlanta, Georgia

I know that some of you have read *The Innovators* by Walter Isaacson (Simon and Schuster, 2014) because you have been encouraging me to read it. And I'm glad you did. It is the story of how many men and women we're involved in the invention of the computer and other related technological advances. It is also the story of parallel innovations in such things as financing new work and innovative management structures for the development of extraordinary inventions. The phenomena of innovation and advances in knowledge do not often run in a straight line. Frequently we learn of more than once of a person working on a particular project only to find that a colleague in another lab and in another country had found the answer a few months earlier. In one lovely acknowledgement of this reality, a man called Jack Kilby was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics in 2000. In accepting the prize, he praised his friend and longtime collaborator, Robert Noyce who had died a few years earlier, but had he been living would doubtless have shared the award. A Swedish physicist introduced Kilby at the ceremony by saying that his invention had launched the global Digital Revolution. Kilby, with characteristic humility and humor said "When I hear that kind of thing, it reminds me of what the beaver told

the rabbit as they stood at the base of Hoover Dam: 'No, I didn't build it myself, but it's based on an idea of mine.'

Great innovation requires a playful imagination, and ability to conceive the inconceivable. It also requires a capacity for dogged hard work in pursuit of the dream. One fellow called J Presper Eckert Jr., known as 'Pres', was one of many who brought into being inventions critical to the US war effort in the 1940s. As Walter Isaacson tells it: "Eckert's social triumph at Penn (University) was creating what he called an "Osculometer" (from the Latin word for mouth), which purported to measure the passion and romantic electricity of a kiss. A couple would hold the handles of the device and then kiss, their lip contact completing an electric circuit. A row of bulbs would light up, the goal being to kiss passionately enough to light up all ten and set off a blast from a foghorn. Smart contestants knew that wet kisses and sweaty palms increased the circuit's conductivity." Eckert was having fun which is a sign of a certain kind of freedom and capacity to imagine new possibilities into being.

The opposite of this innovative and playful capacity is to be stuck in a kind of imaginative dark ages in which nothing much changes, life seems nothing but a series of compromises, same old, same old, --a rat race-- just plum stuck. Such was the affliction of the wicked and lazy

slave of the parable of the talents. He was the one who buried his master's money in the ground and for his trouble was consigned to "the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Anyone among the first to listen to Jesus tell this parable would have been horrified and disturbed by it. In contrast to our ears, the slaves who were praised, along with their master, would have been considered slightly dodgy and not quite right. In a world in which the daily reality of scarcity was the norm, people who made money were often assumed to have made it at someone else's expense. The righteous, responsible person would be the one who buried the talent in the ground. So Jesus appears to be praising gambling, or worse, usury --he praises bankers for crying out loud-- and condemns responsible, prudent action. What is going on here?

The last servant, once memorably called a "lazy rascal" in an early effort at *The New English Bible* translation, has allowed his imaginative horizon to become limited by his assumptions about the master. He knew the master to be harsh, reaping where he did not sow and gathering where he did not scatter any seed. He was trying to keep his head down. He didn't want trouble and could not imagine any other outcome. He was limited by his imaginative horizon. In contrast, the other slaves could not wait to have some fun. They went off *at once* to trade according to their ability.

Brothers and sisters, while individually things might be going well for many of us, our society is stuck in what a former teacher of mine, Ed Friedman, called "imaginative gridlock". He says we can know when a system is gridlocked when we find ourselves or see others on an unending treadmill of trying to get change by trying harder at the same old strategy --burying talent in the ground. He sees gridlock when we are constantly looking for new answers to old questions--maybe I should bury the talent somewhere more secure instead of imagining playing with it. And imaginative gridlock is marked by binary, dualistic, either/or thinking--is the only option to being responsible to act irresponsibly? A stuck society is marked by blaming, togetherness in our misery, the everlasting search for a quick fix or the next new thing. Is there another way to describe a society reflected in the current state of our congressional government? Certainly this has been reflected in the institutions of much of Western Christianity as anxieties about our institutional survival have led to all the marks of imaginative gridlock and consequent decline. God bless every person who offers her or himself for elective office, but neither Church nor State are going to be saved from this reality by electing a new set of leaders.

Ed Friedman saw the mediaeval period or dark ages as just such a time. In a leadership book, published posthumously, called *A Failure of Nerve* (Seabury, 1999, 2007) he wrote "Contributing to the general malaise was a combination of political, social, economic and theological 'downers'. late fifteenth-century Europe, despite its glorious cathedrals, emerging artists and developing network of universities, was a society living in the wake of e plagues, the breakdown on f feudal order and the increasing inability of an often hypocritical and corrupt

church's capacity to ring true. In addition Moorish encirclement had proved invulnerable to centuries of crusades and now severely limited Europe's access to the riches and delights of the Far East. there had not been a major scientific discovery for a thousand years." He goes on to credit the navigators in general and Columbus' discovery of the New World in particular as being the event that unleashed unbelievable artistic and scientific creativity over the next hundred years of re-birth or *Renaissance*.

Getting unstuck begins with a spirit of adventure and a willingness to live into new imaginative horizons. Yes, the iPhone was the invention of the year in 2007, but Walter Isaacson points out that in 2011 "Apple and Google spent more on lawsuits and payments involving patents than they did on research and development of new products." Surely the existential import of Jesus' parable of the talents for us today is a reminder that more gridlock in Washington, Atlanta or our own hearts is already a consignment to darkness. The alternative is playful imaginative experiments.

I know that many of you are looking forward to Thanksgiving and the holidays. But some are facing the coming weeks with a sense of obligation and ennui. Can you imagine changing this up in some way? Having some fun for no particular reason/ How about lemongrass turkey?

(I don't know.)

Are you stuck at work? What might be an alternative other than seeking some different work elsewhere? Could it be changing the nature of the work itself? Reframing the question as to why you do what you do? Staying connected with everyone around you and managing your own feelings as they resist whatever change you might imagine?

Or are you feeling stuck in your marriage? Is there an alternative possibility to trying to reignite old passion or ditching this marriage in hopes of finding a better one? Surely those are ways of being consigned to outer darkness, with no relief from the gnashing of teeth. How can you let yourself stop being so deadly serious and allow some of our unmitigated, unjustifiable but nonetheless fun playfulness to emerge. Can you overcome your guilt about not meeting the expectations of others just enough to move toward getting unstuck and stimulating your imagination, expanding your horizon, reframing the question and participating in the work of God of bringing who brings ever-new possibilities in to being in a universe of ever-expanding universes?

The work does not begin in Washington DC. The spiritual work of imagination begins with each one of us. Where are you stuck? And what are you willing to invest of yourself for newness of life? It is as we each—every one of us start living more imaginatively, more creatively, that we will begin to hear that voice from the heart of the Universe saying "Well done,

good and trustworthy friend. Enter into the deepest joy imaginable. You have been faithful, trusting, imaginative, playful and creative. Well done, good and trustworthy friend. Enter into the deepest joy imaginable."

In our customary time of silence can you commit to being leaven in a world of imaginative gridlock, so a minister in the name of Jesus who showed and led the way, who makes the way possible today? In silence and in response to the gospel, let us pray...