Sunday, July 9, 1972
THE PUZZLING QUESTION OF INEQUALITY (Parable of the Talents)
Luke 19:12-26

Introduction

Most of us have heard this parable which I have just read from the Gospel of Luke many times and we have also prob- ably heard some sermons about the parable — sermons which made the point that we are to use the talents, the abilities which God has given us.

However, when we hear this parable read or discussed we often pass quickly over the last statement in it — the words of Jesus — "I tell you that to everyone who has, will more be given; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away."

Paul Tillich, the theologian once reported that one day a learned colleague called htm up and said angrily — "There is a saying which I consider to be one of the most immoral and unjust statements ever· made," and then he quoted the words of Jesus — "To him who has will more be given and from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away."

I suspect most of us feel equally offended by this statement, and to make it even more offensive, the statement does not only appear at the end of this parable, but it al-so appears at least three other times in the gospels with great emphasis. As a matter of fact, it is clear that the writers of the gospels did not know what to make of the statement. They too were offended by it.,

This particular statement of Jesus offends us because it confronts us immediately with one of the greatest and perhaps most painful and puzzling questions of life — the in- equality of all beings. We often hear a lot about all men being created equal and we politely listen to that statement — but we have some real/doubts about what is meant by equality. We may say to ourselves — "Maybe all men are equal as far as God is concerned; maybe He loves us all equally, but in other ways we are aware of much inequality. In fact, we are continually faced by the man}-· inequalities in life and among persons. And some get quite bitter about it all.

We listen to the parable of the talents, and we ask why did one man receive 5 talents, one two talents and why did the one man receive only one? And then we think about life as we have seen and experienced it. Why do some persons receive more than others in the very· beginning, before using or wasting our talents is even possible? Why is one person born to desperate poverty and another to affluence?

Why do some people have all kinds of athletic skills and'others are clumsy? Why do some seem to have great reason-ing powers and others very little? And why is the ability to get a lot of joy out of life given to one and not to another — or the ability to cope with problems and worries?

Why did one person's child or any one of millions of child-ren die before he had the chance to grow out of infancy? Yet others lived to a ripe old age. Why was this child born crippled in mind or in body and that one not so?

And there is the related question — Why do some use and increase what has been given to them, while others do not seem to have the ability to do so even if they had had more to begin with?

With these thoughts and even more in mind, it's no wonder that when we hear the statement of Jesus — "To him who has will more be given and from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away;" it's no wonder that when we hear this statement we are offended. This seems to make in-equality even greater.

Sometimes people have tried to explain away inequality by saying. that· it all comes about simply because we are each one a unique and individual person. Well, we would agree that we are each different one from the other. In fact, our being individual belongs to our dignity as per-sons. Each one of us is unique and different and we are thankful for that. We would defend our individuality and uniqueness. But at the same time, we are not satisfied that this is an answer to the puzzling question of in- equality.

Nor does it simply help to try to solve the puzzle by saying that one day the problem of inequality will be at least partially solved on this earth. For the person who feels quite unequal right now, this isn't much help. And of course, to say that it will be solved some way in the future is not any help to those persons and generations who lived in the past and are now dead.

However, we need to be careful lest we simply then try to justify all inequality and say — "Well, that's the way it • 3. is and that's the way it's supposed to be and that's the way it's going to stay. Far too many cruelties and injustices have been perpetrated with that kind of faulty reasoning. Jesus never said anything of the sort about inequality.

So then about all we can say as far as Jesus and the Bible are concerned with this puzzling question of inequality is that neither Jesus nor the Bible really answers the question about why inequality exists; or why it happens that some are given five talents, some two, and someone. In fact, none of the great religions or philosophies have really been able to satisfactorily answer this question.

Thus, what we need to do is to face the question and try to find a way to live with it, unsolved as it may remain. So, let's try to do that now.

I. Jesus said, "To him who HAS will more be given." What are some of the things we have that can increase? And then what are some of the things that we had and lost?

1. First of all we can think of much that has been ours and still is ours — such things as material goods, money, intellectual gifts, and many kinds of skills and abilities. According to Jesus'saying, we can expect that even more of the same kinds of things will come to us if we continue to use all these things responsibly. At the same time, those who are lacking in many of these things may lose the little they already have.

We know deep down that there is a large amount of truth in this as we look at life in this world. Jesus'statement may offend us, but we do not very often doubt the truth of it. We remember that in the parable the person who had been given one talent, had that talent taken from him and it was handed over to the person who had/ten. One became richer partly because another had become poorer. Life is full of such situations.

2. Secondly, it is true (and this has been pointed out to all of us many times before) that it is those things which are used, at the risk of being lost, that increase and grow. If we use our money, our skills; if we use this church building; if we work at our relationships, cultivate them, give of ourselves, all such things then grow and expand. However, those who merely try to preserve and hoard what they have without risking their use; are those who do not very long even keep what little they had. Each one of us has probably had something taken from us because we did not use it or took it for granted.

Some of us here were perhaps deeply sensitive to the wonder of life as it is revealed in all of nature. Then slowly maybe under the pressure of work and social life and the lure of other pleasures we lost the wonder of our earlier years — the intense joy and sense of the mystery of life. We didn't continue to cultivate this gift and thus it didn't increase and multiply, and, in the end, we lost it altogether. Now we may find as we try to evoke such feelings again, we cannot. We are empty and do not succeed.

And there may be those among us who once felt and experienced a great love for some person — maybe a husband or a wife — a deep relationship to another human being. But then too, perhaps we took it too much for granted, or we tried simply to preserve or hoard the relationship, or to keep it just as it had always been. We did not nourish it or take the risk of having it grow, and then one day we discovered that it had been taken from us. This is a form of having and not having that is the root of innumerable human tragedies. We are all familiar with such cases.

There is also for some having and then losing of God. Perhaps in our childhood and even beyond it, our exper-ience of God was rich. We may remember moments in which we felt his presence intensely. We may remember our praying with an overflowing feeling, our encounter with the holy in words and music and special places. But now God seems far away.

Again, part of the reason for our losing may be that after a while we simply took it all for granted or it may be that we wanted to keep and preserve God in one .specific way — to box God up and keep everything from changing; and then one day like the man in the p.ar ab le who hid the one coin so that he might have it — found that it was taken from him.

And of course, all of what we have been saying here is true of church congregations as well as individuals. Those congregations who simply want to just keep things as they are and keep what they have just as it has always been, will also find one day, that even what they had has been taken from them.

So, you see even though we cannot adequately answer the puzzling of why inequality exists in the beginning, we can still learn a great deal from this parable about how to live with it.

Let's look at this third "one-talent" man more closely. I suppose that if we took a kind of vote, most of us would say that the householder in the parable treated the third servant rather badly. There is something pathetic about this figure. He is a man who is resigned; a man who say's what's the use? And yet there's something touching about his trustworthiness. The way he took care of that one coin given to him — well, we say, there's something in that, too.

On the other hand, the third servant is the kind of person who is the typical observer, a man who sees everything from the outside. He observes and analyzes the way things go in the world and declares: God is hard and unjust.

And yet at the same time, the fellow is not too consistent. for he allows himself to be influenced by another point of view. He preserves what he has received. He carefully saves it. Thus, in some sense he recognizes the existence and the rights of his master.

He is obviously not going to deny that there is some kind of God. He is the kind who sees the need for the church. But he says, “as for myself, I can’t be active, yet I can preserve the Christian tradition. I can submit to a church wedding and send my children to Sunday school. I can take a Christian point of view. I can wrap my religion in my handkerchief and conserve it.”

Well, even though this too does not answer the puzzling question of inequality, it is worth noting that Jesus radically rejects this kind of point of view. And Jesus does this primarily on the ground that the servant with the one talent does not take his master seriously enough. Jesus is saying it would’ve been better for this kind of person if he would’ve cried out, “I protest against you because you want to reap where you did not sow. I protest against you because you only gave me one talent and you gave the others more.”

You see, there are really only two ways you can take a thin1J seriou1¥• Either you renounce the talent, or you take it and risk everything for it. Either you throw away the talent or you use it and trade with it “There is no third choice. The kind of Christian who is merely extra cautious, those who want only the so — called Christian point of view; these people want this third choice which Jesus rejects. Throw your Christianity on the trash heap, or else let God be the Lord of your life; let him be that in dead earnest. Let him be someone from whom you receive each day meaning and comfort, a goal for your life and marching orders, but don’t take God and hide him away.

The parable is saying that if we, like the third servant in the story, answer the question of inequality merely by observing the world and its events and God’s role in these events, we shall get nowhere! We will have taken away from us even what little we have.

If there is one thing that is certain, it is this: it is impossible to know God by saying that first we will observe life and analyze history and then in case we should happen to find him in this way. we will take him seriously. It’s just the other way around: only those who take God seriously ever know him at all.

But you say, how is one to take God seriously if one knows nothing about him? The answer of the parable is this--one should deal with God in the same way that the master dealt with his servant. The servant should’ve taken the master at his word — so we also need to take God at his word, and these are his words — “Cast your cares upon me, for I care about you” Very well, we can say, “I’ll do it and try it. I have cares and anxieties. I am anxious about tomorrow and next week. So here you are God. You ask for it. I’m casting my cares on you. We can go on to say--” Okay God, you’ve said he who would seek to save his life will lose it, but he who gives his life away will find it. “” I’m going to take you at your word and do it. “This is what we can do as we face the puzzling question of inequality.

All of this is to say that God is less sympathetic with the person who always plays it safe than with the person who risks and fails — at least that person is taking God seriously. You see, God has a different measure of success and failure and perhaps a different measure of equality. God will accept our failures and that is the only thing that matters. If our failures are accepted, then that too is success. But the par-able is also saying that God does not easily accept playing it safe.

Finally, even though there is no completely satisfactory answer to the puzzling question of inequality, it does help us to know that there is an ultimate unity of all beings, a which we unity rooted in the divine life from all emerge. All beings, non-human and human participate in it. And therefore, we all participate in one another.

Because of this we participate in each other's having and in each other's not having. When we become aware of this unity of all beings, something happens to us. The fact that others do not have some skills or talents or whatever, changes the character of our having. It undercuts our security and drives us beyond ourselves to understand, to give, to share, to help. And once we begin to do this, the puzzling question of inequality does not bother us quite so much. Amen.