Sunday, September 20, 1987
THE BEWILDERING PROBLEM OF INEQUALITY
Matthew 25:14-30

Paul Tillich, the theologian, once reported that one day a learned colleague called him on the phone and said angrily, “There is a saying attributed to Jesus that I consider to be one of the most immoral and unjust statements ever made,” and then he quoted the words of Jesus from the scripture reading in the Gospel of Matthew: “For to everyone who has, more will be given, and they will have abundance; but from those who have not, even what they have will be taken away.”

Some of us may also be offended by this statement. And to make it even more offensive, the statement appears not only in the Gospel of Matthew but three other times in the gospels. Further, the statement comes at the end of a parable Jesus told that, in itself, seems to indicate an inequality among us and an unfairness in life itself.

The parable of Jesus hints at one of the greatest and perhaps most painful and puzzling questions of life — the inequality that exists among us and within God’s creation. We’ve all heard a lot about all people being created equal, and we politely listen to that statement, but at the same time, we are also aware of inequality.

We listen to the parable and note that one individual received five talents, another two, and the last person received only one talent. Then we think about life as we have experienced it and ask, “Why do some individuals receive more than others from the very beginning, before using or wasting their talents is even possible? Why is one person born into desperate poverty and another to affluence? It’s unfair.”

Why do some people have an abundance of athletic skill and others are clumsy? Why do some possess reasoning power close to genius while others have trouble figuring things out? And why is the ability to get a lot of joy out of life given to some and not to others? Some among us can cope with stress, while for others, stress cripples them. Some people have beautiful singing voices, while others cannot carry a tune. Why did one child die before she had a chance to grow out of infancy, while another lived to age 99?

And there is the related question implied in this parable: Why are some not afraid to risk and use what has been given to them, while others are afraid to risk or try anything? Then we hear Jesus say, “For to everyone who has, more will be given, and they will have abundance; but from those who have not, even what they have will be taken away.” It’s no wonder that we frequently hear it said, “Life is not fair.”

Sometimes people have tried to explain away inequality by saying that it all comes about simply because we are each a unique and individual person. We would agree that we are each different, one from the other. In fact, our being individual belongs to our dignity as persons. Each one of us is unique and different — with God, there are no duplicates — and we are thankful for that. We can defend our individuality and uniqueness. But at the same time, it is not a satisfying answer to the puzzling question of inequality.

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, or that God will even things out after we die.

There is always the danger that we will use this kind of reasoning to justify present inequality — both the inequality that has come to us naturally and the inequality present in our society because of prejudice or our seeing or treating some human beings as having less value than others. Some people say, “Well, that’s the way it is, and that’s the way it is supposed to be.”

At the same time, our faith does not deny that life deals different hands to different people. Some people have strokes of luck, and others do not. Some people happen to be in the right place at the right time, while others find themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time. Lightning strikes at random. It’s simply a fact of life. If you want to call it unfair, then it’s unfair, but life goes on. Whether or not someday, in the total scheme of things, it will all fit together and make sense, we don’t know for sure. We do know, as St. Paul put it, “Now we see in a mirror dimly.” All we can do for now is to do the best with the hand that life deals to us.

However, what the Bible and the Christian faith say over and over again is that, in God’s eyes, each human being has equal value. Each one of us is loved equally by God. God does not play favorites. This is what the Declaration of Independence is saying with the words, “All men are created equal.” Furthermore, in our system of government, as pointed out last Sunday morning, we are all to be treated equally before the law. That may not always happen, but that is our goal.

But now let’s return to this puzzling parable that Jesus told and the kind of inequality described in it. One individual is given five talents, one two, and one one. Why this is so, Jesus does not say. And then he went on with that bewildering statement—"To those who have will more be given, and they will have abundance; but from those who have not, even what they have will be taken away.”

What are some of the things we have that we can increase? And how does this come about? And what can we lose, and why?

First of all, the parable points out that it is those things which are used, at the risk of being lost, that increase and grow. We all know the old saying, “Use it or lose it.” If we are not afraid to use our money, our skills; if we use this church building; if we work at our relationships, cultivate them, give of ourselves — then all such things grow and expand. This is especially true of love. The more we love, the more we give ourselves in love, the more love we have. On the other hand, those who merely try to preserve and hoard what they have without risking its use — those who try to keep it all for themselves — are precisely those who do not very long even keep what little they had.

“Use it or lose it” is a principle that applies to all of life. If I stop using the muscles in my body, they will atrophy, shrink, and become useless. The more regularly I use them, the stronger and more effective they become. The same is true of my mind. The more I use my thinking processes, the more improved and useful they become. Isn’t this what the parable is saying? Those who were given talents and used them produced more, and those who did not lost what they had.

Each one of us here has probably had something taken from us because we did not use it.

I know individuals who were deeply sensitive to the wonder and mystery 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

pleasures, they lost the wonder of their earlier years. They didn't continue to cultivate this gift and use it, thus it didn't increase and multiply, and in the end, they lost it altogether.

There is also, for some, a having and then a losing of God. We remember a time in the past when we felt very close to God. We may remember times when we felt God was with us intimately — but now God seems far away.

Part of our 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 individual in the parable who hid the one coin so that he might have it, found that it was taken from him.

Let's look at this third "one-talent" person more closely. I suppose that if we took a 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. Here is a person who has resigned from life — an individual who says, "What's the use?" Better to bury the talent than to risk losing it. Better to play it safe. Perhaps he has heard the saying, "Better to have loved and lost than not to have loved at all," and has not believed it. In his case, it's better not to have loved and risk the loss that could come with it.

This kind of person does not want to get very much involved with anything — better to stay at a distance. I meet people who are afraid to get very much involved with the Christian faith and the church. They like to keep it light and on the surface. I hear them saying, "If I get too involved, it might change my life, and I can't risk that. I might become a generous, giving, and more loving person. I might even start giving a larger percentage of my income to the church."

This may not be giving much of an answer to the bewildering problem of inequality, but it is worth noting that Jesus rejects this cautious point of view. According to Jesus, it would have been better for this individual who received one talent if he had refused it. He might have said, "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 thing seriously. Either you renounce the talent, or you take it and risk everything for it and with it. Either you throw away the talent, or you use it and trade with it. Either you deny God, or you get seriously involved with God and God's church. Throw your Christianity on the trash heap, or else let God be in charge of your life. You can't take God and hide God 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, by observing God and not letting God get involved in our lives, we will get nowhere. We will have taken away from us even what little we have.

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. The parable is saying that God has a different measure of success and failure, and perhaps a different measure of equality and inequality than we are used to. 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 parable is also saying that God does not easily accept playing it safe.

And the Good News is this: Once we get deeply involved with God in our lives, then we too see success and failure in a new way, and we also see equality and inequality in new ways. We no longer measure equality in terms of quantity. It's no longer important if another individual has more of something or less of something than I do. We no longer live our lives on the basis of always comparing.

We know that in God, there is an ultimate unity of all things, a unity rooted in the divine life from which we all emerge. And therefore we all, through God, participate in one another. In God's economy, what you have is mine, and what I have also is yours. We participate in each other's having and not having.

When we become aware of this connection, this harmony in all of creation, something happens to us. The fact that others do not have some skill or talent 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 bewildering question of inequality does not bother us quite so much. Amen.