Sunday, September 10, 1995
HOW TO DEAL WITH INEQUALITY
Luke 19:12-26

Paul Tillich, one of this century's most stimulating theological thinkers, said that one day a 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 which conclude the "Parable of the Talents": "To all those who have, more will be given; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away."

These words are not only found in the Gospel of Luke but also appear three other times in the Gospels. In addition, they are the conclusion to a parable that in itself describes an inequality among us and an unfairness in life itself.

This parable illustrates 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 the phrase "all people are created equal," and we politely listen to that statement, but at the same time, we are acutely aware of inequality.

We listen to the parable and note that one individual received five talents, another two, and the last person only one. Then we think about life as we have experienced it and ask, "Why do some individuals receive more than others at the very beginning, before investing or wasting their talents is even possible? Why is one person born into desperate poverty and another into affluence? Is it fair?"

Why do some people have an abundance of athletic skill while others are clumsy? Why do some possess reasoning power close to genius, while others struggle to figure things out? Why are some handsome and others plain? 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 successfully, while for others, stress is crippling. Some people have naturally 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 the parable — why are some among us not afraid to risk and use what has been given to us, while others are afraid to risk or try anything new? Some people are eager to put their abilities to good use and develop their potential, while others let their talents go to waste.

Then we hear Jesus say, "For to everyone who has, more will be given, and they will have in abundance; but from those who have not, even what they have will be taken away." How, then, as people trying to follow the Christian way, do we deal with inequality? What are some of the wrong ways, and what are some of the right ways?

One wrong way is to assume that everything is as good as everything else. Last year, William A. Henry wrote a provocative book, In Defense of Elitism, which I commend to you. In his book, Mr. Henry maintains that too many of us in our culture stubbornly cling to the myth of egalitarianism — that all ideas and cultures are of equal worth. You've heard people say, for example, "It does not make any difference what you believe or what religion you follow as long as you have a strong faith and are sincere." But suppose your religious system maintains that all white people are devils and need to be eliminated?

Is it not true that some ideas are better than others, some forms of government more just, some works of art more universal? Is it not true — dare we say it — that some cultures are more accomplished than others and therefore more worthy of study?

A second wrong way to deal with inequality is to try to force those who excel in some way not to excel because that might seem unfair to someone who has less ability. For example, most of you read or saw or heard the news about Cal Ripken Jr. this past week as he tied and then exceeded the record of Lou Gehrig for the number of consecutive games played. Before he accomplished this record, Ripken received hate mail urging him to take a seat rather than sully Gehrig's memory. The volume and venom of the hate mail were so intense that Major League Baseball had to beef up the security around him. Why? Because he's been living up to his potential.

In 1961, Kurt Vonnegut wrote a fictional short story called "Harrison Bergeron," which pokes fun at our endeavors to make everyone the same as everyone else.

The story begins, "The year was 2081, and everybody was finally equal. They weren't only equal before God and the law. They were equal every which way. Nobody was smarter than anybody else. Nobody was better looking than anybody else. Nobody was stronger or quicker than anybody else. All this equality was due to the 211th, 212th, and 213th Amendments to the Constitution and to the unceasing vigilance of agents of the United States Handicapper General."

Some things about living still weren't quite right, though. April, for instance, still drove people crazy by not being springtime. And it was during April that the Handicapper General's agents took George and Hazel Bergeron's 14-year-old son, Harrison, away. It was tragic, all right, but George and Hazel couldn't think about it very hard. Hazel had perfectly average intelligence, which meant she couldn't think about anything except in short bursts. And George, while his intelligence was way above normal, had a little mental handicap radio in his ear. He was required by law to wear it at all times. It was tuned to a government transmitter. Every 20 seconds or so, the transmitter would send out some sharp noise to keep people like George from taking unfair advantage of their brains. On the television screen were ballerinas. A buzzer sounded in George's head. His thought fled in panic, like bandits from a burglar alarm.

"That was a real pretty dance, that dance they just did," said Hazel.

"'Yup,' said George. He tried to think a little about the ballerinas. They weren't really very good — no better than anybody else would have been anyway. They were burdened with sashweights and bags of birdshot, and their faces were masked, so that no one, seeing a free and graceful gesture or a pretty face, would feel like something the cat drug in. George was toying with the vague notion that maybe the dancers shouldn't be handicapped. But he didn't get very far with it before another noise in his ear radio scattered his thoughts."

Now let's look on the positive side. What are some right ways of dealing with inequality according to our Christian Faith?

First, we need to remember always that according to God's way of seeing us, as taught and lived by Jesus, each human being though differing in ability, has equal value in God's eyes. We each have our own unique and distinct gifts and we are to develop them to the fullest

extent possible so that all of us may be enriched. That's what Jesus was teaching in the parable of the talents.

God does not compare us with each other. All God wants to know is what we have done for the good of all with what's been given us. Like the human body, the human race is made up of many parts. We are to rejoice in our diversity. As the Apostle Paul wrote, "If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be?" The Apostle Paul went on to say, "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you.' And the 13 On the contrary those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensible."

The householder in the parable gave one servant 5 talents, one three and another one. All he asked was that each use what he had been given to the fullest extent. Jesus never in any way implied that the person who had been given five talents was in any way better or worse or of more value or less value than then one who had been given three or the one who had been given one. God loves the one with one talent as much as God loves the one with five talents or three talents. Remember too, in another place Jesus said, "To the person who has been given much, of that person much is also required."

When our Declaration of Independence states that "AII men are created equal," it does not mean equal in ability, but equal in God's eyes. It also means that in our in our system of government we are all to be treated equally before the law. This does not always happen as we know, but we need to keep that as the goal toward which we continually work.

The second thing this parable says about dealing with inequality is that you are to use what you have and not worry so much about — whether you have more or less than someone else. Cal Ripken Jr. loves the game of baseball. He played all those consecutive games not in an attempt to exceed Lou Gehrig's record, but because he wanted to play in each game.

The parable also reminds us that if we do not use what we have been given, we will lose it. We've all heard the saying, "Use it or lose it." When we are not afraid to use our money, our skills; if we work at our relationships, cultivate them, give of ourselves, then all such things grow and expand. This is especially true of ourselves in love, the more love we have.

On the other hand, those who 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 have.

"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 17 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.

Let's look at this third "one talent" person more carefully. There is something pathetic about him. Here is a person who has resigned from life — an individual who says, "What's the use? I've been cheated. I've only been given one talent. Better to bury it than to risk losing it. Better to play it safe." Perhaps he had heard the saying, "Better to have loved and lost than not to have loved at all" — his motto was, "It's better not to have loved and not 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 church or the Christian faith. 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 more generous loving person. I might even start giving a larger percentage of my money to the church.”

This might not seem like much of an answer to how to deal with inequality, but it’s worth noting that Jesus rejects this cautious attitude. According to Jesus, it would have been better for the individual who received one talent if he had refused it. He might have said, “I protest against you because you gave me one talent and others more.”

There are really only two ways you can take something 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 people. Throw your Christianity on the trash heap, or 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, attempt to deal with inequality by merely observing the world and its events or by blaming the world and its events, we will get nowhere. We will have taken away from us even what little we had.

The third thing our Christian faith says about dealing with inequality is that we are to do everything possible to remove any false barriers so that those who are different from us are not hindered as they do their best to use the gifts and talents that God has given them. That’s what we were doing in our latest building project when we made this church building more accessible to everyone.

This is a good place for a little story I read the other day. It doesn’t exactly fit, but when you find a good story, use it. A man fell into a pit and couldn’t get himself out. An objective person came along and said, “It’s logical that someone would fall down there.” A subjective person came along and said, “I feel for you down there.” A Pharisee said, “Only bad people fall into a pit.” A mathematician calculated the exact depth of the pit. A reporter wrote an exclusive story on the pit. A fundamentalist said, “You deserve your pit.” An IRS man asked if he was paying taxes on the pit. A self-pitying person said, “You haven’t seen anything until you’ve seen my pit.” A charismatic said, “Confess that you’re not in a pit.” An optimist said, “Things could be worse.” A pessimist said, “Things will get worse.” Jesus, seeing the man, took him by the hand and helped him out of the pit.

Above all, remember this: in dealing with inequality, God has a different measure of success and failure and perhaps a different way of understanding equality and inequality than the world around us. All God wants to know is did you do your best with what God has given you, and did you help others to be able to do their best as well? Amen.