Sunday, November 17, 2002
USE IT OR LOSE IT
Matthew 25:14-30

On first hearing, some of the sayings attributed to Jesus by the gospel writers seem out of character. Here's an example from today's scripture reading. According to Matthew's gospel, Jesus concluded his parable of the talents by stating: "For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away."

Some of you, I'm sure, are shocked and even offended by that statement. To make it seem even more out of character, that statement appears not only in the Gospel of Matthew but three other times in the gospels. Furthermore, the statement comes near the conclusion of a parable that describes a certain kind of inequality among human beings.

Weren't you taught to believe that "all people are created equal?" The Declaration of Independence, one of the founding documents of our representative democracy, says: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

However, there are different types of equality. The Declaration of Independence states that human beings are created equal in the sense that each one of us is equally entitled to certain rights by our Creator, and among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That does not mean that we are equal in ability, talent, skill, personality, or looks.

The parable of the talents openly acknowledges this. In the story, the owner entrusts his servants with different amounts of his property to manage while he is away on a journey. The word used in the story is "talent." In the ancient world, a talent was a unit of currency. Apparently, its value varied from place to place, but it was always relatively high. Scholars believe that in the time Jesus lived, a talent had the value of approximately fifteen years of wages for the average worker — a large sum. Over time, the word came to mean any special gift or ability.

In the story, the owner gave five portions to one servant, to another two, and to the third servant only one portion. Notice especially this statement: "He gave to each one according to his ability." Thus, the one the owner considered to have the most ability got five talents of money to manage.

In this story, Jesus acknowledges that God has created us with different and various inborn skills and abilities. Some of you have more athletic ability than others. There are those who have incredible musical talent, while others cannot carry a tune. Some of you possess the gift of painting beautiful pictures, while others have difficulty drawing a simple design. There are other people who have an innate ability for solving mathematical problems, while others do not have the same talent.

If you read the book or saw the movie A Beautiful Mind, which is the story of John Nash, a brilliant mathematician, you probably wondered, as I did, where his unusual ability came from. It was also puzzling to him.

Some people have a very positive attitude toward life, while others are mostly negative. The cliché is, “One person sees the glass as half full, and the other as half empty.” The third option, which is not often considered, is that the glass is too big. Some people worry most of the time, while others seem to glide through life with little or no worry. There are those who are not afraid to take risks, and others who are fearful of risking anything.

The point is that life deals different hands to different people. Some people have strokes of luck, and others do not. Think how lucky it has been for each one of us to have been born in this country. It was not our choice. There is the good luck of being in the right place at the right time, and the bad luck of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Lightning strikes at random. All you can do for now is to do the best with the hand that life deals you.

At the same time that our Christian faith acknowledges that we are unequal in ability or skill, it also teaches that this does not give us the right to treat some human beings as having less value than others. Our faith teaches that because you have more intelligence than someone else, it does not mean that God loves you more.

While it’s true that Jesus said at the end of the parable of the talents, “For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away,” he also said in Luke’s gospel, chapter 12, verse 48, “From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.” In other words, the more skill, intelligence, and ability you have, the more responsibilities you also have; the more God expects of you. It also means that the more money you have, the more you are to give away. When you have been given an abundance of any kind, it is both a wonderful and a tremendous responsibility.

Now let’s return to the parable of the talents and its further application to your life and mine in today’s world. What does it tell us about God and how God works in your life and mine? After all, that’s why Jesus told the story.

First of all, Jesus is telling us in this story that it is those things that you use for the good, even at the risk of being lost, that will increase and grow. You’ve heard many times the old saying, “Use it or lose it.” It is when you are not afraid to use your money, your skill, your ability for good purposes, even though they are risky, that good things happen. It is when you work on your relationships, cultivate them, and give of yourself, that such things grow and expand. The more love you give, the more love you have to give. The first two servants in the story were willing to use and invest what the owner entrusted to them, even at the risk of loss.

On the other hand, those who merely try to preserve, hoard, and keep to themselves what has been entrusted to them — those who are afraid to take any risk, afraid to love — will lose what they have. Use it or lose it.

It’s one of God’s basic principles that applies to all of life. If you stop using the muscles in your body, they will atrophy, shrink, and become useless. The more you use them, the stronger they become. The same is true of your mind. The more you regularly use your thinking processes, the more improved and useful they become. This is precisely what the parable is teaching. Those who were given talents and weren’t afraid to risk using them produced more, and those who did not, lost what they had.

The parable underscores the principle that what you have — your skills, your talents, your resources, your money — are gifts, a trust from the Holy One who gave them to you. Those gifts of money and ability are for you to invest in the widening of God's realm. Furthermore, it is the discovery and utilization of your gifts that make you feel alive and give your life meaning and purpose. Living in fear of making a mistake or failing, like the third servant in the story, is debilitating. Living in the hope of making a difference and contributing something positive to life is energizing and exciting. Look at the turtle, who makes progress only when it sticks its neck out. Something ventured for the realm of God is something gained for the people of God.

What I appreciate about the history of this congregation in its 136-year history is its willingness to take risks for the furthering of God's realm. This building was built during the Great Depression of 1929 and 1930 — 1931. This was quite a risk back then. It was expanded in 1966 and again in 1994, and the organ was added in 1998. This congregation took a risk when it began its radio ministry more than 50 years ago and then its television outreach almost 17 years ago. We have added a Saturday evening worship service, a once-a-month Taizé service, an extensive Singles Ministry, an expanding Stephen Ministry, 30 years of Abendmusik, an outstanding early childhood education program, a growing Sunday Church School program, a Wednesday evening program for young people, a pioneering Women's Ministry, and more. We have sponsored refugee families. We have a creative partnership with the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in Ghana, Africa. We have opened this building to all kinds of groups that work for the betterment of our community.

I am confident that this congregation will continue to act like the first and second servants in the parable of the talents: that we will continue to invest and take risks as we go about doing God's ministry.

Use it or lose it. God's principle outlined in this parable applies to organizations and individuals. Each one of you, like the third person in the story, has probably had something taken from you because you 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 God's creation. Then slowly, maybe under the pressure of work and the lure of greed, they lost the wonder of their earlier years. They didn't cultivate the 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 the sense of God's presence. You might remember a time when you felt God was with you intimately, but now God seems far away. Part of the reason for your losing the sense of God's presence might be that you began to take it for granted. It could be, too, that you wanted to keep and preserve God in one specific way, to put God in a box so that your experience of God did not grow or change, and thus you stunted your spiritual growth. Then one day, like the third servant in the parable, you found you had lost what you had.

There is something pathetic about the third servant in the story. Here is an individual 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. Maybe he had heard the saying, "Better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all," and did not believe it. He believed it was better not to love and therefore not risk the loss that could come with it. What he didn't realize was that in the end, he lost it all anyway. A wise friend, who was a very generous person, once said to me, "What I give away, no one can take from me."

This third servant in the story, the one who buried the talent entrusted to him, is the kind of person you meet today who doesn't want to get very much involved with anything. I meet people all the time who do not want to get very much involved with the Christian faith. They like to keep everything 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 overly generous. I might even increase my giving to the church."

This story tells you that there are two ways you can deal with what God gives you. You can take your talents and try to hoard them or bury them, or you can take them and use them for the good by risking them. The story is also saying that God is not very sympathetic with the person or church that always plays it safe. However, God is very sympathetic with the person or church who, for the sake of the good, takes risks and even fails — at least that individual or church is taking God seriously.

When you take risks for the good and use your talents and abilities, even if you fail, God will accept your failures, and that too is success.

God is telling you in this story that the most important thing in life is not how many talents or how much ability you have been given. The important point is what you do with what you have. Those who are not afraid to take risks for good causes will discover that in the long run, things work out for the good. Those who are afraid of life and shrink back, afraid to risk anything, will find themselves shrinking further and further.

I want to close with this suggestion: Do something for someone else whenever possible, at some cost to yourself. More and more, I am convinced that the waste of life lies in the love we have not given and the powers we have not used. The selfish prudence exhibited by the third servant in this story, that risks nothing and attempts to avoid pain, misses happiness as well. Amen.