Sunday, November 13, 2005
WINNING AND LOSING
Matthew 25:14-30

No! This is not a sermon about Nebraska football, volleyball, baseball, swimming, soccer, basketball, golf, or any other kind of game. It's a sermon on what Jesus had to say about winning and losing in life as he described it in his "parable of the talents." According to Matthew's gospel, Jesus concluded this parable by stating: "For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away."

That doesn't sound fair — winners take all, losers get nothing. It seems out of character for Jesus. To make matters worse, that statement appears not only in the gospel of Matthew, but three other times in the gospels. In addition, the statement comes near the conclusion of a parable that describes a kind of inequality among human beings. Let's begin by looking at the issue of inequality, and then you will understand how this applies to winning and losing in life.

You were taught to believe that "all people are created equal." The Declaration of Independence, a founding document of representative government in the United States, says: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." All are created equal; however, this is not meant to imply that human beings are equal in ability, talent, personality, or physical attractiveness.

The parable of the talents openly acknowledges this type of inequality. In the story, the owner entrusts to his servants varying amounts of his property to manage while he is absent. The word "talent" in the story, in that day, was a unit of currency. Its value varied from place to place, but it was known to be relatively high. Scholars believe that in the time that Jesus lived, a talent had the value of approximately fifteen years of wages for the average worker — a large sum. Over time, the word "talent" came to mean any special gift or ability.

In the story, the owner gave five talents to one servant, to another two talents, and to the third servant, one talent. Note especially this statement: "He gave to each one according to his ability." The servant that the owner considered to have the most ability received five talents of money to manage. That makes good sense. You would do the same — choose a financial manager with the best record.

In the story, Jesus acknowledges that God has made creation and each human being with different inborn skills and abilities. Some people have more athletic skills than others. There are those who have incredible musical talent, and other people who cannot carry a tune. Some of you have creative artistic ability, and others have difficulty drawing a simple design. There are individuals who have a natural ability for mathematics, while others struggle to understand beginning algebra.

Some people have a very positive attitude toward life, while others are mostly negative. Some people are worried most of the time, while others seem to glide through life with little or no worry. I know people who are not afraid to take risks, and I know people who are fearful of risking anything.

As in a card game, life deals different hands to people. Some have strokes of good luck, and others have more bad luck. I often marvel at how lucky I am to have been born in this country and to have had loving parents. There is the good luck of being at the right place at the right time and the bad luck of being at the wrong place at the wrong time. Lightning, tornadoes, and hurricanes strike at random. All you can do is your best with the hand that life deals you.

While it's true that the Christian faith acknowledges that human beings are unequal in ability and in many other ways, Jesus also teaches that this does not give you the right to treat some human beings as having less value than others. When the Declaration of Independence states that all people are created equal, it means all people have equal rights under the law. All have an equal right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Furthermore, when 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 an abundance, but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away," remember he also said in Luke's gospel in 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, ability, and money you have, the more God expects of you. 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 in today's world. What does it tell you about life and how God works in your life and in the world at large? After all, that's why Jesus told the story.

First, Jesus is using this story to remind you that when you use what has been given to you to accomplish good, there's always the risk of loss, but at the same time, it's also a wonderful opportunity for growth. You've heard the saying, "use it or lose it." It is when you are not afraid to use your money, your skill, your intelligence for good purposes, even though you are taking a risk, that you allow for the possibility of good results. It is when you work on your relationships, cultivate them — when you take the risk and give — that life expands for the good. The more you give, the more you have. The first two servants in the story were willing to use, to invest, what the owner had entrusted to them. This also involved taking a risk. That's the way life is. Even if they had lost what had been given to them, in the eyes of the manager, they would've won.

On the other hand, those who merely try to preserve, hoard, and keep for themselves what has been entrusted to them will always lose in the long run. They are afraid to love, afraid to risk. In the process, they will always lose what they have. Use it or lose it.

It's one of the creation's basic principles that applies to all of life. If you stop using the muscles in your body, they will atrophy, shrink, and become weaker. 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 stronger they become. This is precisely what the parable is teaching. Those who were given talents and weren't afraid to risk by 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 intelligence, your money — are gifts, a trust from the Holy One who gave them to you. They are to be used for the good, even though in so doing, you are taking a risk. When you do this, you begin to feel alive, and your life is filled with purpose. Living in fear of making a mistake or failing and losing

what you have, 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, so even when you lose, you win. Like the turtle, you only make progress when you stick your neck out. You win in life when you are not afraid to use what has been given to you.

What I have come to appreciate about this congregation the longer I am with you is your willingness to take risks for the increase among people of the love of God and neighbor. This building was built during the severe economic depression of 1929, 1930, 1931, and after. This was quite a risk back then. You expanded the building in 1966 and again in 1994, and the organ was added in 1998. You took a risk when you began the radio ministry more than 50 years ago and then continued with television 18 years ago, and now you have secured new equipment for that ministry. You have added a Saturday evening worship service some years ago, a once-a-month Taizé worship service, an extensive Singles Ministry, an expanding Stephen Ministry, 32 years of Abendmusik, an outstanding Early Childhood Education program, a creative Christian education program for all ages, a forward-looking women's ministry, and more. You have opened this building to all kinds of groups who work for the betterment of this community. You have welcomed individuals who were not welcome in other places. I am confident that you will continue to follow the example of the first and second servant in the parable of the talents, that you will continue to give, to invest, and take risks as you go about doing ministry in the spirit of Jesus.

Use it or lose it. This principle, taught and lived by Jesus, applies to organizations and individuals. Each one of you, like the third person in this parable, has probably had something taken from you because you were afraid to use it.

I know individuals who were deeply sensitive to the wonder and mystery of life as revealed in creation. Then, slowly, maybe under the pressure of work or the lure of greed, they lost the wonder of their earlier years. They didn't use or cultivate their gifts and lost them.

There is also, for some people, a having and then losing a sense of the presence of the Holy. You might remember a time when you felt the Spirit of God was with you, but now it seems far away. It could be that you began to take God's Spirit in your life for granted. It could also be that you tried to keep and preserve the presence of the Holy in one specific way, to put God in a box and keep it closed for fear of losing your experience of God's presence. Then one day, like the third servant in the story, you found you had lost what you had.

There is something sad about the third servant in this story. Here is an individual who has resigned from life — an individual who is always worried and afraid. He tells himself that it's 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 not to have loved at all," but he did not believe it. He believed it's better not to love and therefore not risk the loss. What he didn't realize was that in the end, he lost anyway. A wise friend who had invested in life and lost said to me, "What I have given and lost, no one can take from me. I have no regrets."

The third person in the story, the one who buried the talent entrusted to him, is the kind of person you meet who doesn't want to get very much involved with anything. People like him try to keep everything on the surface. That kind of person is thinking, "If I get too involved, it might change my life, and I can't risk that. I could 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 has been given to you. You can take your talents and try to hoard them or bury them, or you can use them for the good by risking them. When you take risks with your talents for the good, then even if you lose, you win. However, if you are afraid to use for the good what you have been given, if you are afraid that you might lose, then indeed you truly have lost. The story is also telling you that the most important thing in life is not how much you have been given, but what you do with it. Those who are afraid of life and shrink back and are afraid to risk anything will find themselves shrinking further and further.

Here's a guaranteed way to always be a winner and not a loser: do something for someone else whenever possible, at some cost and risk. Then you always win. Jesus is teaching with this parable that the waste of life comes from the love you have not given and the talent, abilities, and powers you have not used for the good. The selfish prudence exhibited by the third servant in this story that risks nothing and attempts to avoid the pain of loss, misses happiness as well. Amen.