



VENTURE CAPITAL

Sunday, November 4, 2007

Rev. Dr. David E. Gilbert

Matthew 25:14-30

I'm told an old Swedish Lutheran pastor once preached on this text to his congregation. The congregation was elderly, and they approached the Bible pretty literally. There was this old codger named Ollie, --- Ollie Lundgren, a real kidder, who always sat in the front row. Well on this morning Ollie seemed to virtually beam as the pastor sermonized about the third servant and people like him who in hell would weep and gnash their teeth. Ollie was sitting there in the front pew with this big, wide grin on his mouth, and the minister couldn't figure it out. Why on earth was Ollie looking up at him with that wide, silly – wait a second, ---TOOTHLESS ---grin on his mouth! Catching on and not willing to be outdone, he shot back, “Teeth will be provided, Ollie Lundgren.”

Well, more than teeth will have to be provided for us, however, if we are to understand Jesus' parable here. For this is a hard text, isn't it? What does our Lord mean in saying....”*For to all those who have more, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away?*” (Matt. 25:29). What can Jesus possibly mean by that? In an age where the rich have more than they could possibly need and the poor have considerably less than they need, where is the “good news” in a gospel that would appear to perpetuate abundance at the expense of deprivation? Jesus words here seem to imply an injustice and an inequality that most of us find difficult to accept; it cuts across the conventional wisdom of what the teachings of Jesus are all about; and that is just the reason why we should look at it closely.

The parable is called “The Parable of the Talents,” and as a talent was a denomination of ancient money/coinage, it would appear that this is a story about money and its use. And I know you fully expect that of me on this Sunday. After all, we're in “stewardship

season.” Next Sunday (as you’ve heard) is Consecration Sunday, and I suspect you expect that my intention this morning is to “prime” you to make a sizeable pledge.

Well, I must confess I do intend to talk about money this morning, but it’s not my main focus. And it’s certainly not my only focus.

What I want to suggest to you this morning is this: Despite the popular title attached to it, --- “The Parable of the Talents” --- this story is not about money, not really, -- not at least in the first sense. It is about *time*, and not just about any time, but about the time in which we find ourselves, the time between the beginning and the end, the “time being.” You see, this story is told by Saint Matthew between the story of the wise and foolish virgins and the story of the last judgment. It is the second of the three final stories that Jesus tells just before he is delivered up to imprisonment and death on the cross. The very next chapter marks the beginning of the end, and so this parable is among those most significant last sayings of Jesus, concerning both the end of his ministry and the age of which his ministry was a sure and certain sign. The story places a premium not on how to use and spend money but on how to use and spend time, especially as there was not very much of it left to go around.

Each of us has only a limited amount of time. For some of us it is longer than for others, but for each of us there is only so much sand in the hour-glass. Some All Saints Sunday in the future --- perhaps not so many years from now -- the bell will chime as our own name is read. And people will hopefully remember us with thankful hearts for the ways we used the gifts entrusted to us. That’s what we celebrate today – All Saints Sunday – as we remember and give thanks for those whom God has now called home.

When the master went away he didn’t tell his servants how long he’d be away or when he would return. He left them with a splendid sense of insecurity, --“creative insecurity.” And we all live with insecurity, don’t we? The test is to see how, living in that insecurity, we manage, each of us according to our ability to use the gifts entrusted to us.

The third man, the subject of the parable, suffers from what we may call a loss of nerve. He is given an opportunity and he finds himself in a state of paralysis. Filled with fear of God and fear of himself, fearful that he will not succeed and fearful of his master, he plays the safest game possible: no risk, no fault. “If I don’t try great things, I get credit if I don’t lose great things. Who can ask for more than that? I will give back what I was given.”

It seems so simple, so sensible, and it appeals to the cautious side in each of us. When in doubt, don’t. What might have been an example of prudence, (a virtue most esteemed in the Bible), becomes in fact an example of cowardice and selfishness. Rather than try to enhance what has been entrusted to him, the servant is more interested in protecting himself, and so his is a denial of the trust that has been given him. In a word, he refused to use his talent.

The three servants here were given talents and were to make more. The first and second servants did that, but the third didn't and what he received (the one talent) was taken away from him. The message would appear quite clear – even if it is difficult: when we don't use our “talent” – (capacity/resources/opportunity) –the things that God gives us and apply them towards the kingdom, we lose out....In fact, we become less able than before.

I often think that the willingness to step out and give – to take a risk in our giving (for that's what's involved in the parable) --- (whether that giving be in time, or talent, or treasure) --- is like cliff rappelling. Cliff rappelling is thrilling, exhilarating, but also scary, especially that first step. The first step requires that you lean out away from the cliff with your back perpendicular to the cliff, out there in mid-air. The natural instinct is to hug the cliff, but if you do that it doesn't work; you just begin to slide down the cliff face. No, for it to work you've got to lean out and trust the rope. And when you do you find it tremendously exciting, a real “gas.” – You relax and have fun, for you've learned to trust the rope. I think it's that way with our giving, with stepping out in our giving. It requires that we trust the rope. And what is the *rope*? The rope is God. The thrill of giving comes of trusting God with our gifts –leaning out and letting God be the rope – trusting the rope.

When we do that our reward is joy. The first and second servants were rewarded for their trust, ---for their willingness to act, to put to use, to risk the venture capital God gave them. And so they were invited to enter the joy of the master, to enter into his happiness – the happiness God all along wants for us.

But the other side of that truth is: If a talent is to grow it must be put to use. The most gifted and profound talent or ability, unpracticed, unemployed, never put at risk, is as good as nothing. The great Arthur Rubenstein was once asked why he practiced the piano so much. He replied, “If I don't practice one day, I know it; if I don't practice two days, the critics know it; and if I don't practice three days, everybody knows it.” Talent --- great or modest --- if it is to have a chance to do good, must be practiced, used, and employed; if we don't use the talent given us by God, if the gift isn't practiced, it will be lost. As said of privileges and athletic skill: “USE IT OR LOSE IT.”

This is the saddest and hardest part of the terrible tale of the talents: The unimproved, unused talent is taken from the cautious servant, and the one who risked the most is given the most, and what remains for the cautious when even caution is removed? Not very much.

This is not an example of taking food from the mouths of those who have not.....to fill the stomachs of those who have. No. It is saying rather that those who dream no dreams shall have no vision. And isn't that the worst kind of impoverishment? The cautious servant trusted neither himself nor his master, and in the end, like a criminal who is not allowed to profit from his ill-gotten gains, the servant is not allowed to profit from his lack of faith and action. He fails the test, and is required to withdraw.

So, where does that leave us? As I said, this is a story/parable about time, -- about the right and good uses of time, -- and about the time in which every one of us finds ourselves: in the time being, or now. It is a story about talent, --- ability and opportunity and resources. Jesus tells this story near the end of his own time in order to impress on us that we will be judged not on how much we have, (on who “dies with the most toys”) or even on how much we get or give, but on how wisely and well we use what has been entrusted to us. God has great expectations; so too must we.

So let me ask you a question: *What do you expectof yourself?* Perhaps I should ask that question a bit differently: What is it you want to be known for? Really known for? What is the legacy that you want to leave behind? When you look deep inside, what is it you really want? – the deep dream that God himself probably most wants for you. What is that dream?

Now, let me ask you a second question: In what way – or how do you sense --- the Spirit of Jesus Christ nudging you, pushing you, leading you---- to make that dream come true? How or where is the Spirit calling you to grow, to risk, to take a step of faith, to use your gifts and resources in a new way?

Maybe.....
in your home,
in your school,
in your work,
in this church.

Often fear and caution keep us from making the kind of capital venture Jesus speaks of here. You and I wonder what we can do. The rabbis have a saying. They tell us that when a wise man heard that the end of the world was near he went out into his garden and planted a tree, --- an act of courage, audacity, and hope.

What can you do?

You can plant a tree.
You can take a step of faith.
You can express your hope, even courage.

John Wesley, on behalf of all the cautious among us was once asked the question “But what can I do for the kingdom?” and replied:

Do all the good you can,
By all the means you can,
In all the ways you can,
In all the places you can,
At all the times you can,
To all the people you can,
As long as ever you can.

If you give serious consideration to this use of your talent, your time, and your treasure, then neither this church nor the whole church of Jesus Christ need ever fear, and for that let the whole church say AMEN.