

NOVEMBER 15TH SERMON: "USE IT OR LOSE IT"

I admit I find verse 29 of the gospel troubling---that bit about those with more get more and those with less have even their small portion of talents taken away. This seems antithetical to much of the rest of Scripture. I thought those with two coats were to give one away, not get an extra from those barely clothed? What's going on with this seemingly punitive parable?

After some biblical exploring, I came across a few verses earlier in Matthew's gospel in which the disciples ask Jesus why he speaks in parables. He replies: "For to 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. The reason I speak to them in parables is that 'seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand'" (Matthew 13: 12-12).

Perhaps the talents in this tale represent wisdom, seeing and understanding the presence of the will of Jesus. Those who recognize the Messiah and follow and learn more about who God is and what God requires. Those who perceive rightly the character of God act accordingly---and in turn gain more wisdom. It is in the practice of faith that our faith deepens and grows, in turn, when we fail to exercise it it atrophies and is diminished. A life of faith requires taking risks for the sake of of the gospel. It demands enough trust of us to let go of our talents, our gifts, our resources, to be used in the service to the God who entrusted us with them. It is in our letting go that we find freedom and expand our faith.

Such risk taking grows from trust in God who makes us stewards and cannot be undertaken when we are afraid. Fear engenders scarcity and self-protection, not generosity and creativity. Fear makes for fight or flight, not welcome and investment, commitment.

The epistle reading this week reminds anxious new believers that they have all the information they need to be unafraid. Paul reminds them that they are not destined for wrath, but rather for salvation. He tells them who they are: children of light and day, those who remain awake and sober in eager expectation of the return of Jesus, the Christ. Like the servants entrusted with the talents in Matthew, those early Christians live lives of expectation and faithful waiting.

Can we who wait for the pandemic to abate and the political landscape to settle do so in hopeful anticipation of Christ's return, knowing God's kingdom is present and the Spirit is at work? Can we trust the God who lifts up the prophets and provides in the wilderness, the God who sends the Son not to condemn the world but to redeem it, use the talents given to us in ways that demonstrate the abundant love of God? Might we begin by taking some small risks for Jesus' sake right where we are with what we have, being faithful in little as we experience God's goodness and become ever more faithful in much?

In a climate awash in fear, demonstrating trust does not come easily. The temptation to bury our talents grows with each threat and uncertainty. Those of us who follow Jesus are called upon to encourage each other and build one another up so as to be able to take the risks that faith requires. In an article in the New Yorker, written by Barak Obama regarding the road to the passage of the Affordable Act, Obama addressed these issues. His closest advisors told him not to take the risk. They said he had expended all the political capital he had in passing the legislation to help stem the fallout from the financial crash of 2008. They cautioned him that trying and failing would weaken his presidency. Obama, after considering all this input, notes in the article: "Being timid wouldn't change that reality." This is true for us as well. No doubt we are navigating stormy water politically, economically, culturally, physically. There are real dangers to our well-being and threats to

our common life. However, being timid will not change that reality.

As people of faith, when our chapter of God's redemption history is one populated by dangers from within and without, we are called for such a time as this to use every talent God has given us in service to the kingdom and for the sake of the gospel. Now is not the time to hunker down in fear, hoard our gifts, and hope that we can hide until the storms pass. We are to step into the breach and be repairers of it. This means we must take risks, act prayerfully in faith, trust the One who calls and equips us and go for broke with our talents.

What might this look like in our lives, in the life of our congregation and community? Imagine it for a moment. Envision it and take a small step toward bringing that Spirit-inspired vision to fruition. Be faithful in little and learn how that trust grows and expands as it is exercised.

Being timid will not change our reality. Neither will being fearful. Being faithful, taking risks for the sake of Jesus, trusting God to use whatever gifts we offer and betting it all on the gospel through the power of the Spirit might. Let's go from broke and find out.

Go in peace, share your love, Amen and Amen!