

PENTECOST XXVIII
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
November 19, 1989
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"USE IT OR LOSE IT!"

A nobleman went into a far country to receive a kingdom and then return. Calling ten of his servants, he gave them ten pounds, and said to them, 'Trade with these till I come.' ... Then the third servant came saying, 'Lord, here is your pound, which I (buried) away in a napkin; for I was afraid of you, because you are a severe man; ... Luke 19:12-13;20-21

Most Christians find pleasure and direction from Jesus' parables. Some parables rate as the most familiar as well as the most favorite stories of the Bible. Most of us really enjoy the parables that can be popularized or sentimentalized -- like the Good Samaritan or the Lost Sheep. But once in a while, Jesus offers a parable that cannot be sweetened. Today's parable is that kind -- it cannot be sentimentalized or popularized for mass consumption. It does not present God with the ever-welcoming arms of a heavenly babysitter. Jesus was now at the end of his journey to Jerusalem; it was no longer a time to coddle the curious about the meaning of discipleship. It was time to tell the truth about God's gift of grace. This parable speaks very bluntly, very directly, and even very harshly as a spiritual warning to the faithful: **DO NOT BE IRRESPONSIBLE WITH GOD'S GIFT OF LOVE. USE IT, OR LOSE IT!!**

Let me attempt to illustrate its meaning with an application more current -- last Wednesday's Family Enrichment Seminar. Alan Hanson, from the Samaritan Counseling Center, began last Wednesday's session by giving each of us 10 million dollars. "Now that you have it," he said, "write down what you would do with it." Almost all of us invested part of the 10 million in philanthropy and Christian charity. A couple of people invested in environmental advocacy; some designated a portion for the construction of nursing homes and centers for the aging. I invested a sizeable amount in research for AIDS and cancer. Still others invested in economic development for America and the 3rd world. All of us invested in the future of our families. One honest person even said she'd go out and buy a Lambergini. **BUT NOT ONE OF US ... NOT ONE SINGLE PERSON DECIDED TO SIT ON THE MONEY.** No one said he/she would bury it in the back yard, or in a mattress, or a napkin in the cupboard. **IN SHORT, NOT ONE OF US WOULD PLAY IT TOTALLY SAFE WITH THAT 10 MILLION.** We all sought to put it to good use!!

And that's the point of Jesus' parable: **GOD EXPECTS THE SAME IMMEDIATE COMMITMENT FOR HIS INVESTMENT IN US.** He will not tolerate anyone burying it or stashing it away in a napkin. He expects us to use the same principles in religion that we use everyday in business. In the world of business -- anyone who doesn't take any risk with capital is viewed as a fool. So how is it, says Jesus, that anyone can wisely invest material things, **YET** turn around and **BURY GOD'S MOST GRACIOUS INVESTMENT -- HIS LIFE-GIVING LOVE AND FORGIVENESS??**

By sheer luck, the world empties the lottery jackpot into someone's lap and that person wisely invests it to his own glory and greater comfort. Yet, by divine grace, God intentionally showers each of us equally with his eternal mercy and goodness, AND IN RESPONSE WE HIDE IT ... WE BURY IT IN SUNDAY MORNING CEREMONIES ... WE CONFINE IT TO A SO-CALLED HOUR OF POWER ON THE SABBATH. We become ultra conservatives with God's greatest gift of grace, because, after all - we don't want TO BE KNOWN AS FANATICS of faith. Is it any wonder that Jesus warned: "I tell you that to everyone who shares his faith, more will be given; but from him who shares nothing, even what he has will be taken away!" In short, either USE GRACE, OR LOSE GRACE ... for he who does not use what he has been given has already lost it.

This parable of truth is not only applicable to religion -- it's point can be illustrated daily in almost all endeavors of faithful living. The most talented and accomplished musicians either practice or LOSE THEIR GIFT. The most dedicated athletes practice and play in the "off-season" as well as the "on season" or they lose their gifts. Whether our talent be aesthetic, physical, or religious -- it needs to be used, practiced, and performed for it to grow ... or soon it is lost! Many of us recall the great concert pianist who was asked why he practiced six hours a day. He said, "If I miss one day, I know it; if I miss two days, my critics know it; if I miss three days; my whole audience knows it." You either USE IT, OR LOSE IT!

Today Cody Hageman (Taylor Potere) receives God's golden crown of love and forgiveness. God's makes no greater investment in humanity than the one given in this sacrament. Jesus Christ went straight to Calvary and died to offer this lifetime gift to Cody (Taylor). That was no easy investment for Jesus. Jesus also took our chains of guilt and greed upon his hands and feet -- our transactions of guilt and greed nailed him to the cross. That was no easy offering for our sake! This same Jesus Christ wore the crown of thorns and suffered scorn and abuse because people like you and me denied his kingship. Rather than be blessed by his truth, our forefathers chose to brutalize his body. That was no easy sacrifice for your sake and mine. BUT GOD DID NOT BURY HIS INVESTMENT IN SOME JEWISH CAVE ... GOD DID NOT WITHDRAW HIS LIFE-SAVING COMMITMENT TO THE WHOLE WORLD ... GOD DID NOT DEFAULT ON HIS FORGIVING MERCY FOR YOU AND ME.

God overcame brutality, persecution, and every other human attempt to bury his grace and truth. He offered a resurrection investment that cannot be devalued. It has given you and me a goal beyond the grave; it has offered EACH OF US a franchise of charitable giving rather than mere capital gains; it has delivered us from the eternal poverty of nothingness to the everlasting paradise of discipleship. There is no greater investment given to humanity.

From this day forward, God says to Cody (Taylor) and to each of us: TAKE MY EVERLASTING INVESTMENT, AND USE IT NOW! I have given you equal shares of my gracious love. No one in all creation has been short-changed of this grace. Each of you has received the same pound - the same golden crown. BUT FOR MY SAKE, PLEASE DON'T BURY IT! As I have blessed you with my love, so be a blessing to others with that same grace.

God is not asking any of us to give more than we've been given -- JUST TO BE FAITHFUL WITH THE INVESTMENT THAT HE HAS ALREADY MADE. He simply says: BE FAITHFUL WITH THE POUND THAT I HAVE GIVEN! With time and everyday use, that pound will grow five-fold, ten-fold, even a hundred-fold. JUST USE WHAT YOU'VE BEEN GIVEN! But above all, don't bury it ... don't put it away in a napkin for future use ... don't wait to use it in the future, for the future is unknown. How tragic that some just never pay any attention to this important warning.

Since my arrival at Hope in 1979 -- we pastors have baptized more than 230 children. But the families of 80 of these children have buried God's baptismal grace. Many of them have been flagrant in their commitment to and nurture of the "pound" of grace that God has given. These little ones have merely become a buried statistic in this parish registry. God wants these little ones to be living, breathing, laughing, crying expressions of his grace! He wants them forever to be vitally connected to his body -- not lying dead in some statistical book that gives nothing but names and numbers. How tragic that 80 children have thus far had God's gracious love buried by unfaithful parents!

It's like the woman who felt called to the ordained ministry, but she kept waiting and waiting for the right moment to enter. God says to her: Don't bury the grace I have given: USE IT NOW!

It's like the retired woman sitting in the church pew every Sunday who stopped giving any contribution to the church -- because she said she might need that money some day. God says: Don't bury my grace for an unknown future: USE IT NOW!

It's like the pastor who recognized racism among his members and waited for it to go away by itself. God says: Don't bury my truth and grace when its needed today: USE IT NOW!

It's like the young couple who dropped off their children for Sunday School every week - but never shared that grace in worship or education. God says: If my grace remains buried all week for adults - it's doubtful that it will come alive for children with only one hour of Sunday School.

It's like the members who write year after year on their pledge cards: "SAME AS LAST YEAR." Somehow or other, these people were graced by God many years ago ... they remember that special moment of grace way back when! But since that time - there have been no new experiences or moments of gracious love. It reminds me of the story of the retired teacher who was debating at Stewardship time whether adding a little to her gift would really matter. She said to herself: "My little bit certainly can't make that much difference -- after all, the best I can do is just another \$.50 a week. What good will that do? So she just stayed at the same figure.

How sad that she didn't realize that her \$.50 would buy ten cups of dried milk for undernourished children in the world. And if she gave that added \$.50 every week -- her \$26.00 a year would yield 520 cups of dried milk for needy children. And if that woman were a member of Hope ... and every other member along with her just added \$.50 a week to their giving -- it would yield \$13,000 ... enough to buy 260,000 cups of dried milk for needy children. And if that woman and every other member made that a buck-a week extra -- it would yield \$26,000 a year ... or more than a half million cups of dried milk for needy children. And imagine if they each made it more than a buck?!? And which one of us, retired teacher or not, has not buried much more than a buck a week on something more foolish than a half-million cups of dried milk for needy children??

God only asks that we bless as we have been blessed ... that we grace as we have been graced. But above all - that we use THE GRACE WHICH WE HAVE BEEN GIVEN AND NOT BURY IT IN SOME NAPKIN OR VAULT OR HIDEAWAY FOR SOME FUTURE DAY. John Powell, a famous Roman Catholic author and priest, has hung a sign from his bathroom mirror that he reads each morning. It says: "Good morning, Jesus. Thank you for loving me today. What have you got going for this day? Whatever, I want to be a part of it!" That little reminder enables John Powell to use God's grace given each and every day. Could we possibly be given a better reminder this Sunday before Thanksgiving? For you know and I know that our tendency is to only give thanks for the multitude of God's graces just one Thanksgiving Day each year. And living that way IS REALLY BURYING A LOT OF GOD'S GRACE GIVEN TO US.

It's never too late to start living and giving the grace given to us. We either USE IT, OR LOSE IT. So today - I offer you a special thanksgiving greeting from John Powell: "GOOD MORNING, JESUS. THANK YOU FOR LOVING ME TODAY. WHAT HAVE YOU GOT GOING FOR ME THIS DAY?? WHATEVER, I WANT TO BE A PART OF IT!" Take that sign home today; tape it to your bathroom mirror or your dashboard! But above all -- USE IT, OR YOU'LL LOSE IT ... and then you'll forget to give thanks EVERYDAY for the grace that God has so generously first given you!

AMEN.

Good Morning, Jesus!

Thank you for loving me today!

What have you got going for me this day??

Whatever, I want to be a part of it!