

"THE TEMPTATION TO HANG BACK"

A Sermon By

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Park Avenue Methodist Church
July 12, 1987
Fifth Sunday After Pentecost

TEXT: "...I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent
in the ground"

Matthew 25: 25

INTRODUCTION Graffiti can be vulgar. Graffiti can be humorous. Graffiti, on occasion, can also be used in the service of truth. Some words scribbled on the walls of a subway station recently caught my attention: "I am neither for nor against apathy".

There are those times and those situations in life that cause us to experience a crisis of the spirit, a crisis in morale. There are those times when we ask ourselves whether it's worth the struggle...whether to act or quit...whether to "hang in" or "hang back".

The year of Pearly-gate and Iran-gate is already inducing in some one of two reactions: we will resolve to put our best efforts on the line to change a situation, or we will, in understandable disillusionment and disgust, decide to quit.

PARABLE OF THE TALENTS I believe that the Parable of the Talents told by Jesus has something to say to this growing crisis of morale for it is essentially the story of a man who resolved to quit, a person who decided it was better for him to "hold back". Let's look at this wonderful parable, one of my favorites, once again.

In this parable a man of means goes away on a far journey. Before leaving he entrusts his operation to three servants. To one he gives five talents, to another two, to a third one. After a "long time", as the record puts it, the master of those three men returns to settle accounts with them. He finds that the man who had been given five talents has made five talents more, and that the man who had been given two talents had reproduced two more.

But the focus of this story falls on that man to whom one talent had been given. When the master stands before this faltering servant to inquire of his talent, the man replies, "Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not winnow; so I was afraid and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours."

The five talent man and the two talent man each received the same response from the master. "Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much." But the master was thoroughly displeased with the one talent man. He dressed him down, saying "You wicked and slothful servant". He faulted his judgement, "You ought to have invested my money with the bankers and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest." He punished him for his cowardice, saying, "Take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten."

We tend to cringe at the severity. In fact, we tend underneath to sympathize with this one-talent man against the master. Perhaps because we sense that in his indictment, we ourselves often stand indicted. And so, in defence of this single-talent man we ask, "Why all the stir? After all, he was only being cautious. Could he help it if he had been blessed with a conservative disposition? Besides,

he had not lost everything. He had kept what was given him. It was still intact. He had not taken his talent and blown it in acts of wild extravagance, like the Prodigal in the far country. We wonder...what had he done to incur such displeasure. The answer is "nothing" - and that's just it! "I was afraid and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here - you have what is yours".

A FLAWED ATTITUDE

He did nothing! Jesus is here exposing a flawed attitude toward life. Withheld good - He is pointing out - can be as great a sin as perpetrated evil. It is one thing to play and lose; it is quite another matter to determine not to play at all. To "hang back" and do nothing.

When one starts to examine the man's testimony clearly he sees that this attitude toward life rested on a foundation of fear.

He opens his defense with some unconvincing remarks about his master. "I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow". But presently he comes to the point. "I was afraid". This is the fear of failure. Basically he held that life could not be trusted with his own personal initiatives. He felt that life really is not responsive to man's noblest efforts. His verbal expression of fear and his refusal to risk action were something of an implicit accusation against life itself. And this attitude leads one to live defensively like old Peachum in the Three-penny Opera who says:

"The wickedness of the world is so great you have to run your legs off to avoid having them stolen from under you".

And what is fear basically, but a lack of faith - a lack of trust in the faithfulness of God and in the responsiveness of life.

Moltmann in his Theology of Hope reminds us that in the last book of the Bible where those who have resisted the will of God are enumerated by categories, those who are "cowardly" and "faithless" come before the polluted and the murderers and the fornicators and the sorcerers and the idolaters and the liars. (Revelation 21: 8). The "cowardly" first and the "faithless" second. I think Jesus is presenting us with an interesting truth in this parable when he suggests that withheld good can be as great a sin as perpetrated evil.

Now this "one-talent" man by his lack of initiative distanced himself from his master who in the parable stands for God. Jesus wanted us to picture God as a father not only to be loved, but also as a worker to be joined. Acts can be forgiven, but even God cannot forgive the "hanger back" - the person who does nothing, who goes off and burys his talent. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

GET THE TALENT OUT

The point that Jesus makes in this story has meaning for me as a person, as a citizen, and as a Christian. Let's take them one by one and think about them.

Jesus seems to be saying: get the talent out. It is at the very least good psychology. I believe that far too many of us go through life "hung up" and "restricted". We underlive our potential. We ought to get the talent out, turn it loose to see if something can happen with it. One will never know what a thrill it is to ride a roller coaster by sitting in a ferris wheel.

I feel sorry for anyone who has never played stickball. I learned the game on the streets of Albany as a youngster back in the early 1940's. I learned the game with a bunch of boys and to tell you the truth, I was always afraid when first learning that I wouldn't make contact with the ball. And so I would shorten up on the broom handle, and what I ended up hitting were little darters between short and third, or weak little pop ups out by second base. I wanted to really connect, but I never did know the thrill of really socking the spalding ball until I took the advice of an older boy who said, "Hey...hold the thing down at the end and swing full". I did, and what a great feeling it was. That was the Summer Joe D. hit in 56 straight games - the Summer of '41, and once I learned to really swing, I pictured myself as the next Joe D. I would sit through five or six hours of 6th Grade just waiting for another chance to get the broom handle and swing again. Once in a 6th grade game I hit the ball over the fence and we lost it. I was fearful I'd have to buy the school a new one.

And I shall always be grateful for the teacher who gave us the introductory course in speaking and Homiletics in seminary. We were a bunch of nervous, up-tight seminarians, somewhat self-conscious and not particularly anxious to get up and talk before our classmates. I recall that for the first semester we did not stand up to say much of anything. Instead we had to get up in turn and act out a pantomime of our own choosing. It is very difficult to act out a pantomime and stay tight. One must be loosened up in order to "speak out".

One will never learn how buoyant water is and how much fun swimming can be while hanging on to the edge of a pool.

This is a sin that so many commit - to underlive life. One doesn't have to be a gangster, or a mugger, or an addict to displease God. Just take what you have and bury it and underlive your potential. Stay with only the subjects that you know. Stay close to the friends you already have. Never break loose and launch out into something new. Stifle your spirit of adventure.

Several years ago I took up golf and how I have enjoyed it. I wish I had taken it up when I was a teenager, but then...who knows...maybe it's a good thing I didn't. It could have played havoc with my weekends in and around the Church.

AS A CITIZEN, TOO

"I knew you to be a hardman...so I was afraid and I went and hid your talent in the ground". This word of Jesus has meaning for us as citizens of this land.

I find myself wondering as I did during Watergate whether a few more weeks of Irangate hearings and proceedings will make us throw up our hands and abandon the field to others, or produce in us a determination to be more sensitive to civic and national affairs in order to prevent occurrences of this sort of thing.

One of the most moving things I have clipped in recent years are some lines by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. The story of this man is well known and I need not recount it except to say that he was a harried and oppressed Russian author who has an appreciation for freedom that most of us do not have because we have never been without it. He is very much aware of what can happen - from personal experience - in a society when people turn to their own personal successing and forego concern for life around them. He calls this the "spirit of Munich". He writes:

"The spirit of Munich is an illness of the will of prosperous people. It is the daily state of those who have given themselves over to their thirst for well-being at no matter what cost, to material prosperity as the principal goal of life on earth. Such people - and there are a multitude of them in the world today - choose passivity and retreat, anything so that their accustomed life should continue undisturbed, anything so as not to have to cross over into hardship today, while tomorrow, they hope, will take care of itself."

The spirit of Munich could very well be one of our most subtle temptations facing us as a people today. I'm sure it is.

Some time back a friend shared an observation that with the disappearance of Life magazine we have now lost, apart from news magazines, the last regularly published magazine of general interest to everyone. The trend today is toward periodicals about boating or wine or hunting or homes or making money. Which simply means that we are gradually making a retreat from the general to the particular, from the particular to the personal.

Have you ever noted that those who think grimly of this city are those who fundamentally are discouraged from its pulsating life? I have in mind those folks who sit and watch the TV news every night to passively discover what new disasters have befallen the Big Apple. Those of us who have some heart about the city and some faith in its future are those who have at least some small piece of the action. Once you take that talent and bury it and determine to live defensively, you're finished. You might as well "cash in" your talent and call up Frank Campbell's. Take it from him and give it to him who has ten. And let life go on.

AS A CHRISTIAN "Master, I knew you to be a hard man". "So I was afraid and I went and hid your talent in the ground". Finally there is something vitally important here - not only as individuals and citizens - but also as Christians - for you and for me.

The Bible Commentary points out that this parable was aimed specifically at the Scribes who had taken what might be considered a protectionist attitude toward their religion. They considered themselves guardians of orthodoxy. And apparently what excited them was not new truth, but the discovery of some heresy that they could stamp out. God - on the other hand - was trying to get the Hebrews to universalize their gifts, to share them with the world. And the Church of Christ as the new Israel was to release what it had to the nations.

Faith, dear friends, was never meant to be a "dead-end" street with you. You were not meant to be a "catch-basin" for God's amazing grace. You were meant to be a conduit. So let's get it straight then. Despite all that has been said about the heroism of modern man, no one anywhere is doing alright without God.

This city is hurting for love. It's hurting for justice. It is hurting for warmth, for faith, for righteousness. And if you've got some, then turn it loose. Don't say, "Well, the city would never respond to what I can do". That's God's problem how the city responds. Your job is to turn it loose...to get the talent out of the ground and put it to work. Say something about His love in letters you write, in conversations you hold, in contacts you make.

"I was afraid and went and hid your talent in the ground". This is not what God wants of us as persons - citizens - Christians. I believe He wants us to overcome the temptation to hang back....He wants us to "hang loose", to come forward, to stand up, to be involved, to take what talent we have and put it to work somewhere in His name.

PRAYER Forgive us, O God, that we have been so and so cautious and so respectable in our response to Thee. Make us, in the days of this Summer, to be more daring in word, adventurous in deed. All of this to the end that our personal initiatives, however poorly offered and scaree they may be, may be useful unto Thee - to the glory of thy name, we pray. Amen.

"THE TEMPTATION TO HANG BACK"

TEXT: ".....I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent
in the ground" (Matthew 25: 25)

INTRODUCTION Graffiti can be vulgar. Graffiti can be humorous. Graffiti, on occasion, can also be used in the service of truth. Some words scribbled on the walls of a subway station recently caught my attention: "I am neither for nor against apathy".

One senses that America at present is in the throes of a crisis of great importance. It is a crisis in morale. The question coming before more and more is whether to act or to quit...whether to hang in, or hang back.

(1)

We have learned across the weeks of this Summer that Watergate is more than a harmless caper or political prank. And what's worse, the suspicion grows with every rap of Sam Ervin's gavel that Watergate is but the tip of an iceberg that represents a widespread sickness in our way of life. From rigged soap box derby races of boys to disturbing examples of deceit and dishonesty of responsible adults at high levels of power and influence, we have been witnessing the crumbling of the walls of integrity and trust that hold our society together.

The year of the Watergate is already inducing in many one of two reactions: we will resolve to put our best efforts on the line to change the situation, or we will, in understandable disillusionment and disgust, decide to quit.

PARABLE OF THE TALENTS I believe that the parable of the talents told by Jesus has something to say to this growing crisis of morale for it is essentially the story of a man who resolved to quit, to hold back.

In this parable a man of means goes away on a far journey. Before leaving he entrusts his operation to three servants. To one he gives five talents, to another two, to a third one. After a "long time" as the record puts it, the master of those three men returns to settle accounts with them. He finds that the man who had been given five talents has made five more, and that the man who had been given two talents had reproduced two more.

(2)

But the focus of this story falls on that man to whom one talent had been given. When the master stands before this faltering servant to inquire of his talent, the man replies, "Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not winnow; so I was afraid and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours."

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We tend to cringe at the severity. In fact, we tend underneath to sympathize with this one-talent man against the master. Perhaps because we sense that in his indictment, we ourselves stand indicted. And so, in defense of this single-talent

man we ask: why all the stir? After all, he was only being cautious. Could help it if he had been blessed with a conservative disposition? Besides, he not lost everything. He had kept what was given him. It was still intact. had not taken his talent and blown it in acts of wild extravagance, like the Prodigal in the far country. We wonder "what had he done?" to incur such displeasure. The answer is "nothing" - and that's just it! "I was afraid and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours." He did not

A FLAWED ATTITUDE

Jesus here is exposing a fatally flawed attitude toward life. Withheld good, he is pointing out, can be as great a sin as perpetrated evil! It is one thing to play and lose. It is quite another matter to determine not to play at all.

There is such a thing as a fatal attitude toward life. When one examines the man's testimony clearly he sees that this attitude toward life rested on a foundation of fear.

He opens his defense with some unconvincing remarks about his master. "I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow". But presently he comes to the point, "I was afraid". This is the fear of failure. Basically he held that life could not be trusted with his own personal initiatives. He felt that if you cast your bread on the waters it would sink. He felt apparently that life really is not responsive to man's noblest efforts. His verbal expression of fear and his refusal to risk action were something of an implicit accusation against life itself. And this attitude leads one to live defensively like old Peachum in the Threepenny Opera who says,

"The wickedness of the world is so great you have to run your legs off to avoid having them stolen from under you".

And what is fear basically, but a lack of faith - a lack of trust in the faithfulness of God, and in the responsiveness of life. Moltmann in his Theology of Hope reminds us that in the last book of the Bible where those who have received the will of God are enumerated by categories, those who are "cowardly" and "faithless" come before the polluted and the murderers and the fornicators and the sorcerers and the idolaters and the liars. (Revelation 21: 8). The cowardly first and the faithless second. I think Jesus is presenting us with an interesting truth in this parable when he suggests that withheld good can be as great a sin as perpetrated evil.

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This past year I have been learning to play golf and have enjoyed it very much. I wish I had taken up the game years ago, but many times this Summer I said to myself, "It's really a good thing, on the other hand, that I didn't take up the game twenty years ago.....it could have played havoc with my weekends in New York City....in and around the church".

AS A CITIZEN, TOO "I knew you to be a hard man, so I was afraid and I went and hid your talent in the ground". This word of Jesus has meaning for me as a citizen of this land.

I am deeply concerned about the choice, indicated earlier, that is now facing all of us in this land: The question of whether a few more weeks of Watergate hearings and court action will make us throw up our hands and abandon the field to others, or produce in us a determination to become more involved than ever in civic concerns...in order to prevent occurrences of this sort of thing.

SOULS-HA-NEATS -IN

One of the most moving things I have read recently was some lines by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. The story of this man is well known and I need not recount it except to say that he was a harried and oppressed Russian author who has an appreciation for freedom that most of us do not have because we have never been without it. He is very much aware from personal experience of what can happen in a society when people turn to their own personal successing and forego concern for life around them. He calls this the "spirit of Munich". He writes,

"The spirit of Munich is an illness of the will of prosperous people. It is the daily state of those who have given themselves over to their thirst for well-being at no matter what cost, to material prosperity as the principal goal of life on earth. Such people - and there are a multitude of them in

the world today - choose passivity and retreat, anything so that their accustomed life should continue undisturbed, anything so as not to have to ~~cross~~ over into hardship today, while tomorrow, they hope, will take care of itself".

The spirit of Munich could very well be our most sinister temptation facing us as a people today.

A friend shared an observation that with the disappearance of Life magazine we have now lost, apart from news magazines, the last regularly published magazine of general interest to everyone. The trend today is toward periodicals about boating or wine or hunting or homes or making money. Which simply means that we are gradually making a retreat from the general to the particular, to the personal.

Have you ever noted that those who think grimly of this city are those who fundamentally are disengaged from its pulsating life? I have in mind here the folks who sit and watch the TV news every night to passively discover what new disasters have befallen us. Those of us who have some heart about the city and some faith in its future are people who have at least a small piece of the action. Once you take that talent and bury it and determine to live defensively, you're finished. You might as well cash in your talent and call up Campbells. Take it from him and give it to him who has ten. And let life go on.

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(11)

Faith, dear friends, was never meant to be a "dead-end" street with you. You were not meant to be a "catch-basin" for God's grace. You were meant to be a conduit. So let's get it straight then. Despite all that has been said by secular theologians about the heroism of modern man, no one anywhere is doing all-right without God. This city is hurting for love. This city is hurting for justice. It is hurting for warmth, for faith, for righteousness. And if you've got some of it, then turn it loose. Don't say "Well the city would never respond to what I can do". That's God's problem how the city responds. Your job is to turn it loose, to get that talent out of the ground and put it to work. Say something about His love in letters you write, in conversations you hold, in contacts you make. Ask God to help you recover a sense of the relevancy of Christ for every man.

"I was afraid and went and hid your talent in the ground". This is not what God wants of us as persons, citizens and Christians. I believe he wants us to overcome the temptation to hang back. He wants us, in the vernacular, to hang loose, to come forward, to stand up, to get involved, ~~and as they say - to let it hang out.~~ and to be involved...to take what talent we have and put it to work somewhere in His name.

PRAYER Forgive us, O God, that we have been so nice, so safe, so cautious, and so respectable in our response to the. Make us, in the days of this new season that awaits us, to be more daring in word, adventurous in deed. All of this to the end that our personal initiatives, however poorly offered and scarce they may be, may be useful unto thee - to the glory of thy name on earth. Amen