

"TRADING AWAY TOMORROW"

INTRODUCTION

Some parts of the Bible have the capacity to speak to us with stories that sound as contemporary as tomorrow's newspapers.

Take the two lessons which were read earlier in the service. Think for a moment how the Post would headline these two stories. "Brother Cheated In Inheritance Fraud" would be the cover line for Jacob and Esau, and Jesus' story of the fearful steward might read, "Treasurer Convinced In Investment Fiasco". Each of them, you see, is a real case of fraud - one a planned deception and the other a failure to fulfill an obligation. In each incident we see a person who misunderstands the consequences of his action. In each case there is someone who barter away his chance for tomorrow because of something he does or fails to do now.

It happened then; it happens now - every day to you and me and to people that we know. So I invite you to examine these two stories with me this morning and again next Sunday to see what they have to say to us and about our daily living.

CARELESS ABOUT CONSEQUENCES OF OUR ACTION

Let me begin by suggesting that sometimes we can trade away tomorrow

because we are careless about the consequences of our actions now. This is the message of our first lesson.

The story of Jacob and Esau is one of the all-time great Sunday School stories. Chapter by chapter the story of patriarch Issac and his twin sons Jacob and Esau unfolds in Genesis as one of the most appealing of the Old Testament soap operas. Esau is an out-doors man, first born of the twins and therefore the son who is going to inherit all the family land, wealth and leadership of the tribe. Jacob is the quiet indoors person, doomed by accident of birth to second place. In this family, there is a severe division. Issac, the father, loves and favors Esau, but the mother, Rebecca, prefers Jacob. And so the situation is cast in the familiar sibling rivalry which has split so many homes and caused so much trouble.

Jacob and his mother plot ways they can get the birthright away from Esau so that Jacob can inherit. The dramatic incident comes one day as Esau comes in from the hunt famished and exhausted. His brother, Jacob, has been cooking and has some delicious pottage, a kind of soup, ready for eating. Esau asks Jacob for some of the soup and proclaims that if he doesn't have it, he will surely die from hunger. Jacob agrees to share it if Esau will give him the birthright which he covets. There's some dickering, but in the end we see the slow-witted Esau impatiently devouring the good food which he has just purchased at such an extravagant cost.

There's much more to the story than this, but for the purposes of this sermon, let me stop here and urge you to read the rest on your own.

Now, I don't know what this one incident tells you about Esau, but to me it says several things of importance. Esau is not at all unlike many of us who are so concerned about satisfying our physical needs right now, that we mortgage tomorrow for the pleasures of this moment. Here is a man so little sensitive to the spiritual values of his inheritance that he trades it away for a meal. He is a man who has forgotten who he is. He's forgotten tomorrow.

Now before we come down too hard on Esau, let's admit that you and I may have been where he is many times.

For instance, Esau is the adolescent, signing away his birthright in a respected family in order to get a fistful of cheap thrills with drugs. Esau is the father so concerned with the things he must earn for his family that he loses sight of the even more important value of relationships within the family; he forgets to give them himself. Esau is the married person tempted into a convenient infidelity who says, "Surely I have a right to some happiness wherever I find it". Esau is the young person who says, "Who wants to finish high school? I want to get a job. I want a car. I want to get married". Esau is that person who says, "I want what I want, and I want it now!"

~~We've been there.~~ Esau is the person who says in so many words, "Let tomorrow take care of itself. I want to live for today". All of these persons have one thing in common. They've forgotten that they will have to face tomorrow the consequences of the decisions of today.

A teenagers sits in my study and tells me about the group in which she travels. They're fooling around with sex and drugs and she's confused about what she really wants for herself. We talk about it. Mostly we talk about who she is and who she wants to be and how she sees herself - now - and five years from now and the rest of her life.

This is the crucial question: whether we will live as responsible persons who are mature enough to recognize the consequences for our actions, or whether we will continue to be irresponsible children, playing with a future we can never have if we are careless.

FOSDICK STORY There's a wonderful story which Harry Emerson Fosdick loved to tell about the days of the great theological controversy in which he figured so prominently. He reported that one night he was awakened by someone pounding on his front door. He went to an upstairs window to see what all the commotion was about. Outside there was a gentleman who had obviously been drinking far too much. He demanded to know, "Are you Dr. Fosdick?" When he admitted that he was, the visitors then said, "Well I've got an important question for you. What's the difference between modernism and fundamentalism?"

As gently as he could under the circumstances, Dr. Fosdick asked the man to be quiet and go away. But the man persisted and said that he wouldn't go until it was all explained to him. Finally, Dr. Fosdick said, "My friend, you've been drinking. You're talking nonsense. No go away like a good fellow and come back tomorrow when you're sober and I'll explain it to you". "But doctor" said the man sadly, "You'd better explain it now....when I'm sober I just don't give a hang".

Well there are a lot of us who just don't give a hang....about anything religious, about the church, about values, about the future. The message which comes to us from Esau's story is that there are some deeper relationships that are the treasures of every person, and we must be sure that we do not part with them too lightly.

There may be some one present here this morning who is tempted to take an action somewhere in his life that will have important consequences for his future. Indeed, it may determine whether you have a future at all. Life is precious - too precious - to live carelessly. Don't trade away your future by carelessness today.

LOSING TOMORROW BECAUSE OF FEAR

If there are people who trade away their chance for tomorrow through their own carelessness, so, too, there are others who lose their chance for tomorrow because of their fears. This leads us to the second point.

This was the case of the man in the Parable of the Talents which Jesus told. You heard the details of it, and it is familiar to you anyway. A steward is entrusted with a sum of money, which, while not as large as those given to some of his friends, is still a considerable amount. The money is given to him to invest for his master. But the steward is afraid to make the investment for fear, perhaps, that he will lose it. So he does the only thing he can think of - the equivalent of hiding the money under the mattress. He refuses to use it.

Then comes the day of reckoning and he is called upon to present his account. Proudly he gives back to the master exactly the amount of money he had received, but it is not the same, for (if you'll pardon the jargon of today), allowing for inflation, the buying power of that money has decreased. So he is not returning the same amount - the investment has lost value. And the master is justifiably angry that the person he has entrusted with responsibility has let him down. The parable closes with the exhortation from Jesus to be faithful to what is given to you.

Now as quickly as possible, we ought to get our minds off the idea that Jesus is talking just about a business transaction and that his parable is about how to use one's money. His real point is that this is how life works. In any area of life that you can think of it is a fact that there is no way to stand still. We either move forward, or we fall back. We do not ever maintain ourselves just at the point we are now.

APPLICATIONS OF IT

Now you can think of some obvious applications of this - the athlete that must continue to train in order to perform...the musician who can never let down the discipline of practice if he is to continue to develop. I think of the charming comment made by Pablo Casals who was asked why, when he was already the greatest cellist in the world, he continued to practice with such intensity. His comment was, "Because I think it is just possible that I may be improving".

I think of children in the Cerebral Palsy unit in the hospital who must exercise limbs that hurt when they are moved. They must exercise in spite of the pain or lose the use of that organ permanently. I think, too, of Dr. Fosdick whom I mentioned earlier who went to a rented room - an office room - and spent each morning in study for years without interruption before becoming the preacher who set the standard for a whole generation of preaching in this land.

But there are some other interesting places in life where the parable runs true. Masters and Johnson have been pioneers in the field of research on sexual activity and personhood. One aspect of their research was to investigate why some older adults seem to maintain their sexual capacities into their 70's and 80's. They discovered that there seemed to be one deciding factor. I wonder if you can guess what it was. It was simply whether or not one made use of his or her sexual capacities in the earlier years of life. In plain words, if you don't use it, you'll lose it. If you want to have it tomorrow, you must make use of it today.

But let me zero in one step closer to some of us, while I have your attention.

Some of us are trading away tomorrow because of our fear of the changes that will take place in our lives.

I'm thinking now of people who are unwilling to look ahead to retirement and refuse to accept that eventually it will happen to them. They make little provision for it and when tomorrow catches up with them, they're hurt and thrown into complete disorientation. Occasionally I talk with older adults who can hardly wait to retire in order to get going with some delightful plans that they have made.

The other afternoon up at the 92nd Street "Y", a doctor in the health club asked me if I knew how many people there are in our country today who are 100 years of age and over. I had no idea. Would you care to guess? Would you believe: 10,000! We need to plan carefully for those years of retirement, and fill them with meaningful pursuits.

Paul Tournier, in his book, Guilt and Grace, says:

"Living means choosing and choosing means running the risk of making mistakes. Fear of responsibility is fear of the eventual guilt arising from any involvement. So - in wishing to spare oneself the destructive effect of judgment, one takes the path of greater and more certain destruction - that of flight and cowardice".

I feel very much this way about people who are refusing to deal with the fact that one day all of us will die. This is a fact of life, and I believe it is a sign of "flight and cowardice" when we come to the moment of death totally unprepared. I think of young families where the parents need to have thought together very carefully what will happen to their children in the event of their death. I think of old adults who need to have made a will, who need to have communicated to their children and close friends their feelings about what they think is appropriate at death and how they would like to have their rites of passage celebrated triumphantly.

CONCLUDING SECTION We need to deal with the facts of life today and not trade away tomorrow because of fear or a discomfort about dealing with such things as retirement and death.

There may be some listening to me today who have buried their decision-making because they are afraid to deal with what's involved. Listen carefully to this word of Jesus that you will lose the chance for tomorrow if you refuse to make brave use of your options today. He is saying to us: what you don't use, you will lose. Be responsible for what has been given to you.

And this, too: if tomorrow is to have meaning and purpose for us it will be because we have understood that tomorrow is really part of today. The two are of one piece and we cannot separate them anymore than we can say precisely where the sky begins. A five year old boy was enjoying his first train ride. When the train plunged into the first long tunnel and blackness enfolded all, the boy gasped in surprise. Suddenly the train cleared the tunnel and daylight took over again. The boy was heard to exclaim, "Why...why it's tomorrow today!" "Tomorrow...today". Yes, as they say: "Today is the first day of the rest of your life". Use it wisely.

LET US PRAY As we come, O God, to the close of this hour of worship,
confirm within us the aspirations of this time together.
Thou hast given us mind whereby we may anticipate the needs of tomorrow,
give us also the grace by which we may walk bravely from day to day -
never careless with those important decisions that do affect our future,
but always trusting in thy care that we may be free from tension and
anxiety. All this we ask in the spirit of Christ, Amen

"TRADING AWAY TOMORROW

INTRODUCTION

Today's sermon is the second part of a two part sermon based on two familiar Biblical stories. The first is an incident in the story of Jacob and Esau, and the second is the Parable of the Talents told by Jesus.

As we saw last Sunday, Esau traded away his tomorrow through carelessness. He bartered away his inheritance - his birthright - to his brother, Jacob, for a bowl of soup, a mess of pottage. He mortgaged his tomorrow for the pleasures of the moment, for the immediate satisfaction of his physical need. It happened then, and it happens now.

In the case of the man in the Parable of the Talents, we were introduced to a person who traded away his tomorrow for a different reason. Not carelessness in his case, but rather fear. Entrusted with a sum of money, he was afraid to invest it for fear that he will lose it. He buries it; his master is angry when the time of accounting comes. The parable is reminding us that in life if you don't use what's been given to you, you'll end up losing it. Be responsible for what has been given you. Don't trade away your tomorrow because of fear.

Last Sunday's sermon concluded with the story of the five year old boy who was enjoying his first train ride. When the train plunged into a long, dark tunnel and blackness engulfed all, the boy gasped in surprise. Finally, as the train cleared the tunnel and daylight took over again, the boy exclaimed, "Why... it's tomorrow today!" If tomorrow is to have meaning and purpose for us, it will be because we have understood that tomorrow is really a part of today. The two are of one piece. We cannot separate them.

Carelessness and fear have wrecked more than one person's tomorrow. Today is the first day of the rest of your life. Yes - use it wisely!

DEVELOPMENT

This morning I would like to introduce a third way by which we trade away tomorrow, and that's through our unwillingness to be involved today. It reminds me of the character in a recent Flip Wilson sketch that I referred to several weeks ago. When asked about his religious affiliation, he replied, "I'm a Jehovah's By-Stander". "They wanted me to be a witness" he said, "but I didn't want to get involved".

We find ourselves struggling today with many problems in society because people refused to involve themselves in them when they could have been dealt with. I don't know when the problem of world hunger might have been manageable, but it's not hard to see that the problem did not just emerge in the past year. Where were the people who should have protested that the world's goods should be used to feed all the world's people?

Or, coming closer to home, what about the problem of this city's bankruptcy. I don't know how you feel about it, but it, too, is not a problem that has burst upon us just recently. It has been coming and administration after administration covered up the fact, continued poor fiscal policies and showed the problem under the rug. Finally, it has become a problem so large and complex that it's now questionable whether it can or cannot be solved. There was a time to act and when we missed it, it caused more problems later on.

Dick Gregory, the comedian, tells about an incident from his boyhood that

stills burns brightly in his mind. It seems he had a good day selling papers and shining shoes, and he went into a restaurant and bought himself a veritable feast - a bowl of chili, a cheeseburger, a soft drink, and a piece of chocolate cake. As he ate, an old wino came in and ordered exactly twenty-six cents worth of food and made the most of every bite.

When it was time to pay the check, he simply said that he didn't have any money, whereupon the owner knocked him down with a bottle, watched him bleed a little and then began kicking him. At that point, the young Dick Gregory said, "Leave him alone. I'll pay the twenty-six cents".

The wino managed to pull himself up, then leaning on the counter, said, "Keep your twenty-six cents. You don't have to pay - not now. I just finished paying for it". He started out, then he put his hand on the boy's shoulder and with the venom in his voice now replaced by sadness, said, "Thanks, sonny, but it's too late now. Why didn't you pay for it before?"

With that, the young Gregory recognized that he had waited too long to help another man. He had avoided getting involved; he had shrugged something off as not his responsibility. And when we refuse to accept the responsibility for involvement now, we run the risk of losing our opportunity later on.

POINT COMES HOME Here, I sense, is another place where the theme of these two sermons comes home for you to answer for yourself. Where are the places where you are refusing to be involved because it may mean taking some risks, or forcing you to make a commitment you aren't ready to make, or put down something you don't want to put down.

Where are those places? Only you can answer.

R. C. Hutchinson has written a book called, The Elephant and the Castle. In it a young man becomes embroiled with the law. He's falsely accused of a crime, but because of his reputation as a troublemaker, the police assume his guilt. There is a young girl from the privileged classes who witnessed the event and knows that he is innocent. She went to court, determined to say something in his defense, but she was overwhelmed with the strangeness of the place and the unfamiliarity with the proceedings and in the end, timidity wins out, and she remains silent. Hutchinson describes her in this way,

"She found herself voiceless among the voices of anger and conflict; and she knew if she yielded to that impotence, no battlefield remained; she would be cast as a permanent spectator".

"Cast as a permanent spectator". What a line. What troubles me is that there are too many people among us and around us who may feel in their hearts off hearts that the role of "permanent spectator" is enough for them. They do not wish to get involved, no matter what it will mean for the future.

It was C. P. Snow who said not too long ago,

"The danger is, we have been brought up to think as though we had all the time in the world. We have very little time.....so little that I dare not guess it".

To break the cast of "permanent spectator" and become an "active participant"

is not the easiest thing to do. Our ruts are comfortable; we don't like to change our ways. We like it the way it is.

There's a monastery in the East built on the side of a mountain where access to the inside is made only by being drawn up the side of the mountain in a basket on a rope. A person was descending. Another person was waiting at the bottom to go back up. He asked the man who was pulling the rope, "How often do you change the rope?" He replied, "We change it when it breaks". Is that what it takes? By then it may be too late.

BACK TO THE FUNDAMENTALS OF THE FAITH

We were saddened this past week by the death of Casey Stengel. That old man of baseball was loved by many. My son and I met him several years ago out at Shea Stadium. His death earlier this week brought to mind that lecture he once delivered to the Met players about ten years ago after they had lost another game, one more loss in a string of about fifteen losses. Casey took them into the club house, closed the doors to the press and proceeded to take them to task. "We've got to get back to the fundamentals" was the way he began. "Now this here, wooden piece of wood...all smooth and shiny...this here is a bat! And this here, hard, round, sphere...this is a ball". "Now the point of this game we are playing is to hit this ball with this piece of wood!" They say that about that time in the lecture a voice called out from the back of the room, "Slow down, Casey, you're going too fast for me".

We need to get back to some "fundamentals" in terms of what it means to be a committed follower of Christ. The message from God is that we must be involved in our world - just as He, through Christ, was involved in seeking to save this world. The message from God is that not only does He ask for our involvement, but that He will empower us to do that which must be done in His name. He does not promise us success. He calls us to be faithful and the promise that in that faithfulness, we shall find fulfillment and meaning.

In a class in Ethics at Yale Divinity School, they use to argue about what a person should do on the ocean if there were only provisions for four people and six people were in a lifeboat. Who should be abandoned? Who should die? The Old, the young, the sick, the well? A young man by the name of Clark Poling was in that class. Heatedly, he debated the question. When the bell rang at the end of the class, the professor, Richard Neibuhr, would say, "We'll pick this up next time....."

Several years later, during World War II, Clark Poling was a chaplain on the troop ship, Dorchester. On a dark Winter night in mid-Atlantic the bells sounded for General Quarters: a submarine had torpedoed the ship. Clark Poling with two Catholic chaplains and a Jewish chaplain went to the side of the ship, took off their life belts, and knelt in prayer as the ship sank beneath the waves and the crowded lifeboats shoved off into the dark and cold waters. Four chaplains - a Protestant, two Catholics, and a Jew gave their answer.

Our faith is tested - not in text books or in words - but tested daily when lives are committed and involved. Am I trading away tomorrow through an unwillingness to be involved? And so here at the end I must ask myself these questions and ask you to do the same. If not now, when? If not here, where? If not me, who?

LET US PRAY

Forgive us, O God, for trading away tomorrow through carelessness, through fear, and through our unwillingness to be significantly involved. May we not be content to be "permanent spectators" in the larger game of life.

Help us to recapture the "fundamentals" of our faith, as on this World Communion Sunday, we remember the life of One who was deeply involved. We remember his words:

"Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends..."

Load us, Lord, more deeply into the mysteries of life and death as we see them revealed in the bread and wine of the Last Supper. May the bread and wine open our eyes to the presence of Christ among us. May we see there plainly, clearly and simply stated, the meaning of our existence and of thy purpose for us and all people.

Bind us more closely to each other and to Him. Lift up our hearts and our minds to Thee, that we may go out renewed in body and soul - fed, nourished and made new.

We ask this in the name of Jesus who died that we might live.

Amen

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INTRODUCTION

Today's sermon is the second part of a two part sermon based on the Parable of the Talents by Jesus. Those of you who were here last Sunday will recall that the sermon emphasized the fact that we sometimes barter away tomorrow because we are careless about the consequences of our actions of today. It also made the point that we trade away tomorrow because of our fears.

If we throw away our chances for tomorrow through carelessness, cowardice we have no one to blame but ourselves.

DEVELOPMENT

We are apt to barter away tomorrow through our unwillingness to be involved. This is the idea I wish to develop with you this morning.

Many of us are like that character in a recent Flip Wilson sketch who when he was asked about his religious affiliation replied, "I'm a Jehovah's By-Stander". Then he went on to say, "They wanted me to be a witness, but I didn't want to be i volved".

I would suggest that most of the problems we face in our society today are here because people refused to involve themselves in them when they could have been dealt with. I don't know when the problem of world hunger might have been manageable, but it is not hard to see that the problem did not just emerge in the past year. Where were the people, like us, who should have protested that the world's goods should be used to feed all the world's peoples?

I don't know how you feel about the problem of New York's bankruptcy. But it, too, is not a problem that has burst upon us just recently. It has been coming ad administrat on after administration covered up the fact, continued poor fiscal policies and shoved the problem under the rug. And so, finally, it has become a problem so large that it is questionable whether it can or cannot be solved. There was a time to act, and when we missed it, it caused more problems later.

Dick Gregory the comedian, tells about an incident from his boyhood that still burns brightly in his mind. He had had a good day selling papers and shining shoes, and he went into a restaurant and got a veritable feast - a bowl of chili, a cheeseburger, a soft drink, and a piece of chocolate cake. As he ate, an old wino came in and orderd exactly twenty-six cents worth of food, and made the most of every bite.

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involvement now, we run the risk of losing our opportunity later.

church by your refusal to —

And here, I suppose, is another place where the point of the sermon comes home for you to answer for yourselves. Where are the places where you are refusing to be involved because it may mean taking some risks or forcing you to put down something you don't want to put down? Is it here in the

R. C. Hutchinson has written a book called *The Elephone and the Castle*. In it, a young man becomes embroiled with the law. He is falsely accused of a crime, but because of his reputation as a troublemaker, the police assume his guilt. There is a young girl from the privileged classes who witnessed the event and knows that he is innocent. She went to court, determined to say something in his defense, but she was overwhelmed with the strangeness of the place and the proceedings and in the end, timidity wins out, and she remains silent. Hutchinson describes her in this way,

"She found herself voiceless among the voices of anger and conflict; and she knew if she yielded to that impotence not battlefield remained; she would be cast as a permanent spectator."

I think there are some of us who may feel in our heart of hearts that the role of permanent spectator is enough for us. We do not wish to get involved, no matter what it will mean for the future. But here is where the whole message and promise of the Christian gospel comes to us with power and demand. For the message from God is that we must be involved in our world, just as he, through Christ, was involved in seeking to save our world. The message from God is that not only does he ask our involvement, but that he will empower us to do that which must be done in his name. He does not promise us success. He calls us to be faithful and the promises that in that faithfulness, we shall find fulfillment.

If tomorrow is to have meaning and purpose for us it is because we understand that tomorrow is really part of today as well. The two are of one piece, and we cannot separate them anymore than we can say precisely where the sky begins.

So we Christians are always called upon to live in the present as if tomorrow were here as well. If we throw away our chance for tomorrow through carelessness, cowardice, or fear of involvement we have no one to blame but ourselves.