

“Where’s the life?”

November 13, 2011

Text: *Luke 6:37-38, Matthew 25:14-30*

I.

Always, in the gospels, there’s a sense of urgency. There’s the sense that we have to pay attention ... be aware ... have a BIG PICTURE perspective on things.

It’s as if the Bible is always prompting us about our priorities and, therein, about our daily choices. The scandal that blew up this week surrounding the football program at Penn St. University comes painfully to mind.

All the time, we have to ask ourselves: *what am I doing?* And does what I’m doing reflect my priorities?

As **Matthew’s** gospel moves inexorably towards its conclusion—with Jesus going to Jerusalem to confront the powers that be; with all of the uncertainty about the future; and with the sense, also, that there’s not much time left—increasingly, there’s a heightened sense of the moment.

As *the end* comes more and more into focus, every day and every moment take on greater importance. There’s a certain restlessness of the spirit. In these chapters right before Jesus’ arrest and the darkness that follows, **Matthew** talks about the *need for watchfulness* ... and the need to be *diligent and attentive*.

In the Parable of the Bridesmaids (right before the Parable of the Talents, our reading for this morning), the bridesmaids that plan for future contingencies are rewarded and those who do not are left wanting.

The message leaping out at us is: ***Stay awake! Pay attention!*** Take care of whatever you need to take care of. If there are things you need to do, do them. If there are people you need to talk to, talk to them.

In other words, it’s a time to stand up and be counted, a time to *go for it*, to *risk* acts of faithfulness. It’s time to stand where we need to stand, to be the person we need to be to be faithful to God and to the best that is in us.

II.

In the Parable of the Talents, a wealthy land owner decides to go on an extended trip. However, before departing, he entrusts his property to three of his workers, referred to as *slaves* in the parable.

To the first worker, he gives five talents (a talent is a large sum of money); to the second worker, he gives two talents and to the third worker, one talent—each according to his ability, we are told.

Now, keep in mind the context of this parable.

- It's in the final chapters of Matthew's gospel.
- Jesus is already *in* Jerusalem where, clearly, there are dangers lurking ahead.
- Time is of the essence; there's a heightened *sense of the moment*.

In other words, it's a time to *risk* being alive in the faith; it's a time to *go for it*, to BE the Christian we're supposed to be ... it's time to BE compassionate ... to BE diligent and pro-active in our faith; it's time to BE generous and to *risk* making today count.

With this as the backdrop, what do the workers do?

1. The first worker goes off and with dedication, energy and an eye on the future, he invests his five talents and makes five more talents. Good enough!
2. The second worker does the same thing with his two talents, investing them and making two more talents.
3. But then there's the third worker. What does he do? By now, of course, most of you know the story: he takes his one talent out in his backyard, digs a hole and buries the talent in the ground.

Uh-oh ... not a good idea, it turns out. After a long time away, the wealthy land owner returns and calls the workers in, one by one, to settle accounts with them.

1. When the first worker goes before the owner, he shows him the five more talents he had made. The owner is delighted.

Well done, good and faithful servant, he says. *You have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things. Go, now, and enter into the joy of God's blessings.*

2. Next, the second worker comes before the owner with the same story. He's made two more talents with the two given him.

Well done, good and faithful servant, the owner says again. *You, too, have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things. Go and enter into the joy of God's blessings.*

3. But then the third worker comes in and, suddenly, the mood changes. CHECK IT OUT!

I know you are a harsh and difficult man, the worker says, and therefore, wanting to be careful and out of fear, I hid the talent you entrusted to me in the ground. Here it is, what is yours—it's safe and secure.

But the owner is furious with this disconsolate third worker. *You lazy, uncreative loser, he says. If you knew I was a hard man, why didn't you at least put the money in the bank where it would earn some interest? I'm really upset with you. Take the money from him, he cries out, and give it to the one with ten talents.*

Wow, we exclaim! The landowner, it turns out, is a hard man. Not much compassion or sympathy for the obvious weaknesses of this beleaguered third worker.

III.

The point of the parable, of course, is that we can't just sit on our strengths. We can't simply rest on our gifts, our talents—all the good things we have done in our lives up to now. We have to *risk going for it* today, right now. In other words, be compassionate today! Be good today! Have conviction and courage today! Be generous today!

The problem with this beleaguered third worker is that he let fear to tell him who he was. He allowed his fears to fill his mind and spirit to the point where they defined his actions.

This third worker chose to live like many football teams play in the fourth quarter when they're ahead: playing not to lose. Doesn't this just bug you big time? We see that in tennis and golf too ... where a player who has been performing brilliantly will suddenly, when the match is nearing the end, play *not to lose*.

And what happens? Not all the time, perhaps, but often times they end up losing. Their change in strategy ends up giving new confidence and momentum to the opponent.

There no life in the hole in the back yard. There's no life in living—everyday—out of fear: fear that you're going to fail or that you're going to lose; fear that, whatever it is, you can't do it. Fear that some notion of destiny or fate is against you.

Where's the life? There's no life in fear. Friends, faith tells us: don't live life *not to lose* ... not to fail ... not to risk living. To be sure, the Bible teaches that faith is the antithesis of fear.

Since Steve Jobs died here recently, there has been a lot written about his life. He was a complicated man. A man of great intensity, he wasn't necessarily an easy guy to work with. He could be very demanding and hard on those not living up to his standards.

Early on, when he was building Apple into a billion dollar business out in Silicon Valley, he tried to recruit John Scully, the CEO of Pepsi, to come and join him at Apple. Scully was already rich and very successful but Jobs could sense that he'd become a little bored.

Finally, in an effort to persuade Scully, Jobs said to him:

Okay, do you want to spend the rest of your life selling sugared water or do you want to change the world?

Where's the life? It's not in the hole in the backyard. It's in risking LIFE, risking generosity; it's in risking looking to the future with hope and promise.

We have to risk embracing the future with optimism and expectation. We have to risk being creative, innovative, and imaginative ... and giving the future new shape and new vision.

IV.

Friends, church is about people coming together—in worship ... in prayer ... in mission ... in building up God's kingdom. And today, on Stewardship Sunday, it's about inviting our shared generosity. Together, we are the Church—each of us doing what we can to build up God's Church.

Where the life? It's with us, right here. It's on the cutting edge of whatever we're doing to risk being faithful.

I like the way we do Stewardship Sunday. Why, because we do it together. In a few moments, we'll go over to Fellowship Hall and—together—we'll fill out our pledge cards for Stewardship 2012.

Where's the life? It's in our willingness to risk going for it ... being generous ... each of us doing our fair share. It's in our willingness to risk being positive about the future.

And as **Luke** challenges us this morning: *the measure we give will be the measure we get back.*

All praise be unto God! Amen!

Dr. Jeffrey E. Frantz
Miami Lakes Congregational Church, *United Church of Christ*
6701 Miami Lakeway South
Miami Lakes, FL 33014
On the web at www.mlchurch.com