

Breaking Out Of Our Shelter
Matthew 25:14-19
Preached by Rev Dr. Harry Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
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Even though it aired fifty years ago, The Twilight Zone still wears well. Every week Rod Sterling hosted another half-hour psychological thriller that forced you to face the dark side of the human condition.

One of the more unnerving stories was called The Shelter. It opens with neighbors celebrating the birthday of their beloved friend and doctor. Suddenly the radio broadcasts a national emergency and everybody's urged to gather up supplies and head for their basements. The party breaks up and everybody runs home while the doctor and his family go down to their new bomb shelter.

Realizing their basements were useless in a nuclear attack the neighbors rushed back to the doctor's house demanding to be let into his bomb shelter. He argued it was only big enough for his family, but his friends refused to take "no" for an answer. With a makeshift battering ram they broke down the door just as a new report was broadcast announcing the nuclear attack was a false alarm. Instead of celebrating all the neighbors were ashamed of their behavior realizing their friendships were severely broken and life together would never be the same again.

There are a lot of lessons to be learned from this story, but in light of this morning's parable of the talents, I think the obvious lesson is learning how to overcome your fear of risking what you have because you're afraid you'll have nothing left over for yourself. That's why the good doctor refused to share his bomb shelter. That's why his neighbors broke down his door. They were all afraid there wasn't enough to go around.

Usually the parable of the talents is used in stewardship sermons encouraging you to invest your talents wisely to support the church. Still another interpretation urges you to claim your spiritual gifts and natural talents and offer them up to make the church stronger and more successful than ever. But recently, I find myself doubting these interpretations. Don't get me wrong, honest, hard work and thoughtful risk taking are noble pursuits, and yes Christ wants you to identify your gifts and talents and use them to the best of your ability, but lately I find myself wondering to what end? Why do preachers encourage their flocks to do these things? Is the goal to make their churches "successful"? Or is there a greater vision we cannot see because we're so busy keeping the institution moving and growing in the right direction?

One of the mistakes God's people have always made was taking something God gave us and turning it into something else. For example, God gave the Jews the Law of Moses, which if followed correctly would have created an enlightened, just society that was different from their pagan neighbors. But then the Pharisees turned these broad, progressive principles based on law and justice into a logistic straight jacket.

Likewise Christ called his church into being and we remade it into our own image. God created the Church to be the Body of Christ on earth. We are called out from the world to be a community of servant believers who then go back into the world to proclaim the gospel. The last thing Jesus envisioned was a closed religious society of people who take shelter from the world in an institution that caters primarily to members

only. In other words God's people ministering mostly to God's people with the poor and lost getting the leftovers.

That's how it's been since the Reformation and it worked well (at least theoretically) because mostly everybody belonged to a church so everybody who wanted was being served. But in the last fifty years church membership in Europe and North America has plummeted. On average only 26% of the population in any given area attends church on Sunday. And if attendance and membership continue to decline, today's 26% attendance may some day be considered the good old days.

Does this mean the end of Christianity? Certainly not, but maybe it means the end of what some call Churchianity. What is Churchianity? Churchianity is when the institutional Church becomes a bomb shelter for members only; it's God's people against a scary world, so separate yourself from the world (think of the Pharisees) and hang together for dear life.

Having made these fallible observations, let's review Jesus' parable of the talents and see if what I've said makes any sense.

A very rich man, before going on a long journey, entrusted his top three slaves with his wealth. When the Master finally returned he summoned his three slaves for an accounting. The first slave turned his five talents into ten; the second doubled his as well. But the third slave, fearing he'd lose what little he had, dug a hole and hid his talent in the ground.

The rich man went ballistic. "You wicked, lazy slave! I trusted you to do the best you could with what I gave you, yet you hid my wealth in the ground..."

Now before we try to figure out what's going on here, let's remember where and when Jesus taught this parable. It was Holy Week, days before his crucifixion and Jesus was teaching in the temple. Knowing this is important. Jesus wasn't teaching in an oak paneled seminar room in the middle of the fall semester at a prestigious seminary. He was standing smack in the middle of enemy territory. But like an Old Testament prophet, he railed against the most powerful institution of Jewish life and religion, the Temple priesthood. He didn't want his listeners to confuse the Temple and its traditions with what he called the Kingdom of God. Today he'd warn us not to confuse Churchianity with Christianity.

Having said that, let's get back to the point of Jesus' parable. Why did the Master fire the third slave? He was angry because his slave hid his wealth in the ground. The slave was afraid if he risked it, he'd have nothing left over for himself. Himself? Didn't that one talent belong to the Master? Yes it did, but the slave buried it as though it belonged to himself even though it really belonged to his Master. Likewise we can sometimes think we own the Church, even though it really belongs to God.

A careful reading of the gospels show Jesus from the beginning of his ministry preached the coming of God's Kingdom. Jesus taught his disciples the Kingdom or reign of God is at hand, it's within you, it's all around you. He would then teach "the Kingdom of God will be like this," and then went on with his parables, in this case the story of the man entrusting his slaves with his wealth. That, according to Jesus is how the Kingdom works, God entrusts us with his wealth. What's his wealth? For starters the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the good news that "God so loved the world he gave (or surrendered) his only son." In other words, God gave up his wealth, he gave up himself, never fearing

he'd not have enough left over. The Apostle Paul said it another way. "...Christ Jesus...emptied himself, taking on the form of a slave..." (Philippians 2:7)

Do you see the connection? The Kingdom of God is all about Christ pouring himself into us, so we in turn can pour ourselves into others. That's how we, the Church, are able to continue that chain reaction Jesus began 2,000 years ago. We go and do likewise, trusting God will continue to fill us up with whatever we need when ever we need it.

But the third slave wouldn't believe that. His master trusted him, but the slave couldn't trust himself. He got scared and didn't grow but buried his talent deep in the ground.

Let's now do some creative interpretation. God gave his people his gospel along with sufficient portions of grace, love and compassion, trusting us to use everything we've been given and give it to the world God so loved. The Lesson? We can't hide in the Church and bury our wealth but come out of the church, spread the wealth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, trusting God always provides just what we need at any given moment.

One more thing, and this is important. Let's not define the Church of Christ as an institution, instead think of Christ's Body as he originally intended, the exciting life-giving movement of God's people going into the world to love and serve in God's name. Christ has called his Church and he promises to be with us always, even until the end of the age. So don't worry if the Church will survive, it most definitely will. She may look different than she has since the Reformation, but God knows what he's doing. What we can do today is trust and obey and keep the faith because the Spirit will bring a new birth that will bring to life God's people. We may not live to see it but it will happen.

In the meantime, let's celebrate our new members joining our faith community. Let's welcome them and serve with them as we find new ways to minister, not only to each other, but to anyone "out there" who needs the Gospel of Christ and the love of God's people.