

Do You Like Your Life?

Sunday, January 14, 2001

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INTRODUCTION TO SCRIPTURE

Our first reading this morning is from the Gospel of Matthew, a parable of Jesus commonly referred to as “The Parable of the Talents.” The context for this parable, as I read the situation, is the expectation of the Kingdom of God, which will appear upon the Master’s returns. But in the meantime, while the Master is away, there is the question of what one should do with the resources with which one has been entrusted?

SCRIPTURE READING: Matthew 25:14-30

¹⁴“For it [the coming Kingdom of God] is like a man going on a trip who called his servants and turned his money over to them. ¹⁵To one man he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, based on their ability. Then he went on his trip.

¹⁶“The one who had received five talents went out at once and invested them and earned five more. ¹⁷In the same way, the one who had two talents earned two more. ¹⁸But the one who received one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground, and hid his master’s money.

¹⁹“After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. ²⁰The one who had received five talents came up and brought five more talents, saying, ‘Master, you gave me five talents. See, I’ve earned five more talents.’ ²¹His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy servant! Since you have been trustworthy with a small amount, I will put you in charge of a large amount. Come and share your master’s joy!’

²²“The one with two talents also came forward and said, ‘Master, you gave me two talents. See, I’ve earned two more talents.’ ²³His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy servant! Since you have been trustworthy with a small amount, I will put you in charge of a large amount. Come and share your master’s joy!’

²⁴“Then the one who had received one talent came forward and said, ‘Master, I knew that you were a hard man, harvesting where you haven’t planted and gathering where you haven’t scattered any seed. ²⁵Being afraid, I went off and hid your talent in the ground. Here, take what is yours!’

²⁶“His master answered him, ‘You evil and lazy servant! So you knew that I harvested where I haven’t planted and gathered where I haven’t scattered any seed? ²⁷Then you should have invested my money with the bankers. When I returned, I would have received my money back with interest. ²⁸Take the talent from him and give it to the man who has the ten talents.

²⁹*For to everyone who has something, more will be given, and he will have more than enough. But from the person who has nothing, even what he has will be taken away from him. ³⁰Throw this useless servant into the outer darkness! In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’’*

INTRODUCTION TO SECOND READING

Our second reading is a fairy tale, a minor scripture, if you will, titled “The Stonecutter.” It comes to us from Japan and is the story of a common laborer, a stonecutter, and the mountain spirit that visited him:

THE STONECUTTER

Once upon a time there lived a stonecutter, who went every day to a great rock in the side of a big mountain and cut out slabs for gravestones or for houses. He understood very well the kinds of stones wanted for the different purposes, and, as he was a careful workman, he had plenty of customers. For a long time he was quite happy and contented, and asked for nothing better than what he had.

Now in the mountain dwelt a spirit, which now and then appeared to men, and helped them in many ways to become rich and prosperous. The stonecutter, however, had never seen this spirit, and only shook his head, with an unbelieving air when anyone spoke of it. But a time was coming when he learned to change his opinion.

One day the stonecutter carried a gravestone to the house of a rich man, and saw there all sorts of beautiful things, of which he had never even dreamed. Suddenly his daily work seemed to grow harder and heavier, and he said to himself: “Oh, if only I were a rich man, and could sleep in a bed with silken curtains and golden tassels, how happy I should be!”

And a voice answered him: “Your wish is heard; a rich man you shall be!”

At the sound of the voice the stonecutter looked round, but could see nobody. He thought it was all his fancy, and picked up his tools and went home, for he did not feel inclined to do any more work that day. But when he reached the little house where he lived, he stood still with amazement, for instead of his wooden hut was a stately palace filled with splendid furniture, and most splendid of all was the bed, in every respect like the one he had envied. He was nearly beside himself with joy, and in his new life, the old one was soon forgotten.

It was now the beginning of summer, and each day the sun blazed more fiercely. One morning the heat was so great that the stonecutter could scarcely breathe, and he determined he would stop at home until the evening. He was rather dull, for he had never learned how to amuse himself, and was peeping through the closed blinds to see what was going on in the street, when a little carriage passed by drawn by servants dressed in

blue and silver. In the carriage sat a prince, and over his head a golden umbrella was held, to protect him from the sun's rays.

"Oh, if I were only a prince!" said the stonecutter to himself, as the carriage vanished round the corner. "Oh, if I were only a prince, and I could go in such a carriage and have a golden umbrella held over me, how happy I should be!"

And the voice of the mountain spirit answered: "Your wish is heard; a prince you shall be."

And a prince he was. Before his carriage rode one company of men, and another behind it; servants dressed in scarlet and gold bore him along, the coveted umbrella was held over his head, everything heart could desire was his. But yet, it was not enough. He looked around still for something to wish for, and when he saw that in spite of the water he poured on his grass, the rays of the sun scorched it, and that in spite of the umbrella held over his head each day, his face grew browner and browner, he cried in his anger: "The sun is mightier than I; oh if I were only the sun!"

And the mountain spirit answered: "Your wish is heard; the sun you shall be."

And the sun he was, and he felt himself proud in his power. He shot his beams above and below, on earth and in heaven; he burned up the grass in the fields and scorched the faces of princes as well as of poorer folk. But in a short time he began to grow tired of his might, for there seemed nothing left for him to do. Discontent once more filled his soul, and when a cloud covered his face, and hid the earth from him, he cried in his anger: "Does the cloud hold captive my rays, and is it mightier than I? Oh, that I were a cloud, and mightier than any!"

And the mountain spirit answered: "Your wish is heard; a cloud you shall be!"

And a cloud he was, and lay between the sun and the earth. He caught the sun's beams and held them, and to his joy the earth grew green again and flowers blossomed. But that was not enough for him, and for days and weeks he poured forth rain till the rivers overflowed their banks, and the crops of rice stood in water. Towns and villages were destroyed by the power of the rain, only the great rock on the mountainside remained unmoved. The cloud was amazed at the sight, and cried in wonder: "Is the rock, then, mightier than I? Oh, if I were only the rock!"

And the mountain spirit answered: "Your wish is heard; the rock you shall be!"

And the rock he was, and gloried in his power. Proudly he stood, and neither the heat of the sun nor the force of the rain could move him. "This is better than all!" he said to himself. But one day he heard a strange noise at his feet, and when he looked down to see what it could be, he saw a stonecutter driving tools into his surface. Even while he looked a trembling feeling ran all through him, and a great block broke off and fell upon the ground. Then he cried in his wrath: "Is a mere child of earth mightier than

a rock? Oh, if I were only a man!"

And the mountain spirit answered: "Your wish is heard. A man once more you shall be!"

And a man he was, and in the sweat of his brow he toiled again at his trade of stonemasonry. His bed was hard and his food scanty, but he had learned to be satisfied with it, and did not long to be something or somebody else. And as he never asked for things he had not got, or desired to be greater and mightier than other people, he was happy at last, and heard the voice of the mountain spirit no longer.

RESPONSIVE READING

MINISTER: The poppies send up their orange flares;

CONGREGATION: Swaying in the wind, their congregations are a levitation of bright dust, of thin and lacy leaves.

MINISTER: There isn't a place in this world that doesn't sooner or later drown in the indigos of darkness,

CONGREGATION: But now, for a while, the roughage shines like a miracle as it floats above everything with its yellow hair.

MINISTER: Of course nothing stops the cold, black, curved blade from hooking forward –

CONGREGATION: Of course loss is the great lesson.

MINISTER: But also I say this: that light is an invitation to happiness,

CONGREGATION: And that happiness, when it's done right, is a kind of holiness, palpable and redemptive.

MINISTER: Inside the bright fields, touched by their rough and spongy gold, I am washed and washed in the river of earthly delight –

CONGREGATION: And what are you going to do – what can you do – deep, blue night?

(Mary Oliver, "Poppies," from New and Selected Poems)

SERMON

Introduction

Do you like your life? Does that question ever enter your mind? It popped into mine some months ago. There it was in the forefront of my consciousness, like seeing an advertisement on a billboard right in your face as you come through the U.S. 131 S-curve in

Grand Rapids, the question, simple, direct, challenging: “Do you like your life?”

“Okay, I’ll play along.” And I invite you to play along with me this morning as I circumnavigate this question, knocking on seven different doors, each door opening to a separate room in which another perspective on the question will be entertained.

Is this an important question?

Do you like your life? Room #1.

Is this an important or worthwhile question? Does it matter whether or not I like my life? What does liking my life have to do with how I should live your life, or what my responsibility to life should be, or what life asks of me or calls me to do?

Certainly one is required to push beyond one’s likes and dislikes. If I only stuck to what I thought I liked, would I not shrink and shrink until I was a little irritating bundle of open nerve-endings festering upon this great earth?

And: Does it matter to Being-itself, to the creative energy of the universe, whether or not I like my life? Does God care in the least matter whether or not I like my life? Do not I hear a great guffaw of cosmic laughter when I complain: “But I don’t like that”?

Do your duty to life, take your role in life, carry your weight in life, be a servant of life...that is all that matters. Forget the question, “Do you like your life?” It’s a whinny, whimpy, ego-oriented, new-agey question that should not even rank in the hierarchy of questions relating to values for living.

What kind of philosophy could possibly be based on the question, “Do you like your life?” I’ll tell you what kind of philosophy: HEDONISM...Hollywood, here I come; or, why don’t I go live in Las Vegas, the least self-sustaining city in the entire universe?

Hey, is John Calvin in this room?

I’ve never done a single thing I liked.

Do you like your life? Room #2.

This week I re-read Arthur Miller’s play, Death of A Salesman, the tragic story of Willy Loman and his family...Willie Loman, who wants so badly to be liked, to fit in, to be somebody in the world. He spends his whole life trying to sell himself and his family; but, behind a little bauble of ornamentation that he endlessly polishes for public display, he has nothing to sell and nothing to give, because

he's followed only what he imagines others want. He doesn't know what he wants apart from them; he has no interior or individual life, no independent point of view.

What is it to draw near to the end of a life and have to admit that you've never done a single thing in your whole life that you really wanted to do...that your whole life has been based on pleasing others and doing what you thought they liked and wanted of you?

Willy Loman couldn't even get so far as to admit that to himself – if he had, there would have been some hope – and when his oldest son, Biff, was close to breaking out of this prison, Willy did everything in his power to stop the escape...to the point of taking his own life.

What a frantic, humorless horror of a life it is when you only live what you take to be your duty...only what you think others want of you. You pay, and the world around you pays, for not attending to what you really like...because it takes tremendous effort to squash desire, to thwart *EROS*, which is life's energy *in you*.

And, of course, you can't really thwart it; it just goes underground; you can feel the molten magma moving beneath the surface...rumbling, threatening...and sense the fear behind the front: fear of disapproval, fear of standing out, fear of being found out.

So live at least a little of your own life, if not for yourself, then for your children, that they might live theirs. Each day devote at least a little time for yourself and no one else, something with no other aim than that you take pleasure in it, something you enjoy whether with others or alone.

I've noticed at memorial services over the years that in remembering people, we remember most keenly and with greatest pleasure what they *liked* to do...not necessarily what they were good at, or what they were respected for, or what brought them success – although often these are coordinated and related – but what is remembered with most pleasure is what gave them most pleasure. And sometimes, often even, it's not the big things, but the little, idiosyncratic, off-to-the-side things.

It might be playing a musical instrument, or listening to a certain type of music, or reading a certain type of literature, or shopping at a particular store, or tinkering in a basement shop, or hiking in a forest or mountain, or raising a flower or vegetable garden, or watching a certain television program, or being with a certain group of people, or preparing a certain kind of meal, or hosting a party, or assisting at

a school, church, or civic organization...the possibilities are as limitless as individuals are. Our loved ones are remembered for what they loved, for what it is that came through them out of the creativity of God to which they had paid attention.

A path with heart.

Do you like your life? Room #3.

How do I put together my experiences from these first two rooms? How do I coordinate my desire to relate to the community of larger life along with my desire to follow what I like?

I feel an urge to contribute to the greater good, to be part of the mix of things; and, indeed, I believe we are one before we are two, that the parts are secondary, and the whole, primary...so how do I best serve the whole?

“Follow your bliss,” recommends Joseph Campbell. God is not just transcendent to us; God is also imminent *within* us. The Kingdom is within as well as without. Thus, we can serve life by paying attention to what it is that calls most deeply to us from within.

What is it that *you* most like to do? Where do you feel the deep sense of being? Where are you most at home, most free, most centered, most related, most on track, most happy? There’s the clue. That’s the Voice of God for you, the Creative Life-Force, stirring within you. So: Move toward that, discover what that is, nurture and develop it, and make your contribution to Larger Life through that.

A couple of comments and cautions are in order here:

1) First, following your bliss, knowing *yourself*, is a process, an ongoing life-task, not a once-and-for-all, easily obtained understanding. You step toward your bliss – sometimes tenaciously, sometimes tentatively – but you step toward your bliss and make the path of bliss as you go. It is not already laid out in front of you, or even visible before you, because this life and this time in the world has never been lived before. But you will know this path as your own because it is a path with heart. And you learn what the path with heart is by trial and error...and also by attentiveness, sincerity, honesty, discipline, moral rectitude, and courage.

2) Secondly, the god/goddess who speaks within you is greater than you are. These powers that address you from within are archetypal powers, high voltage cells of energy. Making contact with these powers can be a heady experience, and your ego can get blown

up like a balloon because you mistakenly think these powers belong to you or that you can control them. But they don't, and you can't... you can't ultimately control them. You must try to work with them; but these powers, like gods and goddesses, can be reckless with your human life...wear you down, wipe you out, destroy what you have built up. A posture of humility with respect to them is therefore appropriate.

3) Thirdly, following the path with heart is a two-fold journey. The first aspect of the journey is the ongoing process of finding your bliss; the second aspect is the task of trying to contribute that to the world.

Just now, for example, I am studying the poetry and life of Emily Dickinson. During her lifetime, not one of her 1789 poems was published under her name, and the eleven that were anonymously published were altered to fit the poetic conventions of the day. Her gifts were not yet ready to be received by the world; she was well ahead of her age.

At her death, her sister, Lavinia, found a box in Emily's room that contained the bulk of her poems, sheets of paper tied by string into small packets. An essay I recently read began this way: "What if Lavinia had simply closed the lid of the box, locked it, and stored it in the attic? What if the poetry of Emily Dickinson had never come to light?" (Robin Bledsoe, from *Acts of Light*, p. 40)

And yet, for how many does the world never receive or acknowledge the gifts that are there? But, as Joseph Campbell says: "If you follow your bliss, you have your bliss, whether or not the world receives it."

You cannot insist that the world receive what you have to offer. You are only responsible for your labor, not the fruit of your labor.

And, of course, there are great dangers and difficulties if the world does want to receive your gifts: hubris – you might mistakenly think you are the creator of them; or, your gift might get compromised beyond all recognition; or, you might become a celebrity and hardly have a life of your own.

Part of the force of Emily Dickinson's poetry is that she never expected it to see the light of public recognition.

The hand dealt.

Do you like your life? Room #4.

Do you wish sometimes, or often, that you had been dealt a different hand? Do you wish you were prettier, taller, faster, stronger, more coordinated, smarter, shaped differently, born to different parents, born in a different place, born in a different time?

It's all right to think these thoughts, to fantasize, to daydream. And it's healing to mourn for the road that could not be taken, to feel sadness for what isn't but might have been, and for what once was and isn't now.

And yet comparison-shopping is not the way to make it when it comes to determining whether or not your life has value and is worth living, or whether you can be happy. As the two readings this morning advise – the Parable of the Talents and the fairy tale of the Stonecutter – the place of meaning is the place where you are; and it has to do with playing the hand that is dealt you to the best of your ability.

“Them's the conditions that prevail,” croaked Jimmy Durante... and what a career he made out of his frog-like voice.

And when it comes to comparing ourselves with others – which is how we live so much of our lives – it is worth remembering that living a life is quite different from the inside than how that life might appear from the outside. What if the anxieties and wounds of our souls would show themselves externally like physical afflictions do? How different we would appear! What interior burdens and heartaches, just in this gathering here today, are carried beneath nicely-groomed and calmly-appearing exteriors?!

Dr. Forrest Church, who spoke here a year and a half ago, and will be with us again in two weeks, begins his book, Lifelines, with an account of an anonymous letter that was put one day under his study door, which, in part, read:

What is the meaning of adversity? I don't think I can handle it anymore...I am very tired of this stupid life... I feel absolutely hopeless. A Parishioner.

P.S. Yes, I've had therapy and medication...but I remain hopeless.... Please help me.

Who was the author of this anonymous letter? Fearing possible suicide, Forrest, with his staff, tried to think who might have written this letter. Discreet inquiries were made, but the staff came up with nothing...except the realization that anyone in the congregation could have written that letter. We just don't know what hidden

struggles go on in the interior places of a life.

One day you finally knew what you had to do.

Do you like your life? Room #5.

Do I like my life? No, I don't like my life. I feel like I'm out of breath half the time. I feel like the world is madly racing toward hell and I can't keep up with it. I don't like my work. I don't like my marriage. I don't like where I live. My friendships are getting shallower. And I don't like what I'm becoming. I find myself getting more easily irritated, growing more caustic, becoming stingier. I've lost my way; the tiller has slipped from my hands.

How have you lost your way in life? This is room for stopping the bleeding, and for having a hard conversation with yourself, for recognizing that: "If I keep moving in the direction I'm going, I'll get to where I'm heading."

So this is a room for taking some action. What is needed to change your life? Do you know? If you don't know, then make an effort to find out. Talk to yourself, speak to a friend, see a therapist.

Or, do you know what you should do to change your life? Then, for God's sake, and your own, do it...now...not tomorrow – that day doesn't come. Make the change today. Take the step, even if it be a tiny, baby step, even if you can't see exactly where it will lead, take the step...though it require all the courage and strength you can muster. This is your life. You're not coming this way again. Live it. Now!

*One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice --
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
"Mend my life!"
each voice cried.
But you didn't stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind cried*

*with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy
was terrible.
It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.
But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do --
determined to save
the only life you could save.* (Mary Oliver, "The Journey")

A word of caution before you leave this room... before you throw over the life you have built up, quit your job, divorce you spouse, sell your house, and move out of country. Sometimes that imposing Berlin Wall before you is just waiting to come down, and all it takes is a little push at the right place at the appropriate time... the courage to say to your spouse, "Do you think we could talk?" or to your boss, "I need to make a shift here," or boss to employee, "I want you, if you would, to try a little experiment with me."

It suits me just fine.

Do you like your life? Room #6.

Do I like my life? Yes, I do. I do. I do...so rich, so full of challenge and possibility, of beauty; it overwhelms me sometimes.

When I was seventeen, I thought, "What could it be to live to be twenty-five or thirty years old; how could life possibly maintain its interest?" But now the years fly by...I don't know where the time goes. And I can't imagine I would ever see as much as I have and do.

My life now is not necessarily what I expected, or what others expected of me; but it suits me, it suits me just fine.

Poet Jane Kenyon summarized a day in her life this way:

I got out of bed
on two strong legs.
It might have been
otherwise. I ate
cereal, sweet
milk, ripe, flawless
peach. It might
have been otherwise.
I took the dog uphill
to the birch wood.
All morning I did
the work I love.

At noon I lay down
with my mate. It might
have been otherwise.
We ate dinner together
at a table with silver
candlesticks. It might
have been otherwise.
I slept in a bed
in a room with paintings
on the walls, and
planned another day
just like this day.
But one day, I know,
it will be otherwise.

(Jane Kenyon, "Otherwise")

No solution.

Do you like your life? Room #7.

This is the room for when things are "otherwise."

There are times in a life when things are "otherwise," and where they will not be different. There are horrific things in the world, and in an individual life, things beyond words to tell. This, too, is reality; and one should not turn away from it, for in turning away the horror is compounded.

Do you like your life? There are times to say, “No...no, no, no, no, no, a thousand times, no!!” It’s what needs to be said. And the thing to do is to say it, to let it in, to cry out against it.

There are times when there is no solution, and there’s nothing that can be done...nothing except to say, “No solution.” To hear yourself say “No solution,” and for others to hear you say it, and for others to carry it along with you...there is a time for this, and there is room in the universe for this.

So this is a room for surrender...for sacrifice...for letting go... for lying low...for living with loss...for weeping...for waiting...for silence. “Let darkness come, as it will.” (Jane Kenyon)

Kathreen Emery, a long-time member of our church, now several years deceased, wrote the following poem about her conversation with a situation for which there was no solution. She titled it, “The Companionship of Pain.”

*Why now invade my private life?
The feel of spring is in the air;
I search the twigs for buds
To cheer my heart
And then you come.
I love to walk and make my ancient bones
And muscles swing along at will;
But must I learn to only plod,
Draining my soul to take each step
Because you come?
Perhaps I have become too proud,
Too sure my spirit would remain
Serene mid buffeting of age
Upon decaying frame –
So now you come.
Are you perchance a passing phase
To come and leave as seasons change
Or whims of weather stir the air?
And will you, when the summer blooms,
Perhaps not come?
Or must I – since there is so much
Of you upon this busy earth –
Accept you as my rightful share
And learn to walk alone with you
Because you stay?*

Conclusion

You have walked with me now into and out of seven different rooms exploring this question: “Do you like your life?” A week’s worth of rooms...seven different angles, avenues, approaches, places, spaces. All of them belong to us at one time or another, but are there any of them that you particularly need to re-visit?

Please don’t be afraid to visit and re-visit these rooms...even if you feel you’ve made a mess of your life. I believe there’s a great grace in this beautiful/terrible world, for, as author Robert Johnson has said:

*We take one step forward,
and we slide two steps back,
but we get to Heaven anyway,
because we were headed
in the wrong direction in the first place.*

Benediction

Now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding,
The strength of God which sustains us,
And the love of God which binds us together,
Be with us, now and forever. Amen.

Charge to Congregation:

In the time of your life, live – so that in that good time
There shall be no ugliness or death
For yourself or for any life that your life touches.

Seek goodness everywhere; when it is found
Bring it out of its hiding-place
And let it be free and unashamed.

Discover in all things that which shines and is beyond corruption.

Encourage virtue into whatever heart
It may have been driven into secrecy and sorrow
By the shame and terror of the world.

In the time of your life, live – so that in that wondrous time
You shall not add to the misery and sorrow of the world,
But shall smile instead to the infinite delight and mystery of it. Amen.

(William Saroyan, from The Time of Your Life)

(Note: This is a manuscript version of the sermon preached by the Rev. Bruce A. Bode just after the beginning of the new millennium, January 14, 2001. The spoken sermon, available on both audio and video cassette at the church, may differ somewhat in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)