

Trinity 25 (Propers, Epiphany 6) (Lectionary, Matt. 25:14-29) (2018)

Some years ago, a couple in this church gave me an up-right freezer. Harvest Gold was the colour. . . that kind of dates it, doesn't it?

In any event, I very much appreciated it and put it in my basement. I could just see all the money I was going to be saving by stocking up when things were on sale.

Well, it didn't work out.

Would you believe, three or four years later, most of those items were still in that freezer?

What would happen was I would forget what was in the freezer and go out and buy new stuff. And, guess where most of that food ended up? In the garbage. ///

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In case you haven't been following the news, there is a big controversy over a 2017 purge of the voter registration list in Georgia. Over 100,000 names were removed.

How come? Because these people had not exercised their right to vote for x-number of years. ///

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This past week I learned a new word. You might know it, but I did not. The word is 'sar-co-penia'. Aren't you dying to know what it means?

It refers to a medical condition where the strength and size of a person's muscles decline. It's partially the result of age, but more often associated with a failure to expend those muscles.

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A five-word phrase sums up all three situations I have just described: **Use it or lose it!**

Moreover, what is true in everyday life seems to be true spiritually.

In this morning's Gospel, we find Jesus doing what he so often does, telling a story, a story to illustrate a point. We call these stories parables.

The one we have before us this morning is a familiar one. It is the parable of the three servants and the talents . . . talents being a unit of money.

Over the years, many sermons have been preached on this parable, and a number of applications have been made from it.

The one I wish to make this morning is the one I have just mentioned: **Use it or lose it.**

It's right there at the end when the master who had returned from his trip takes the talent away from the servant who had failed to use it . . . who had buried it in the ground.

In context, this servant corresponds to the Jewish nation headquartered at that time in Jerusalem.

After all, God's covenant people, of which they were a part, had been given enormous privileges and endowments.

Out of all the peoples of the earth, they had been called be the bearers of God's salvation in the world.

They had been entrusted with the sacred writings, the Hebrew scriptures.

They had been given manifold blessings, both material and spiritual. The Temple in Jerusalem was the marvel of the ancient world.

Yet, for the most part, they had not lived up to their calling.

They had misused and abused the prophets that God had sent them.

They had been tall on privilege and short on responsibility.

In so doing they had sat on their blessings, or, if you prefer, buried them.

And now, they were just before sending their Messiah to the cross. What was going to become of this people?

Well, Jesus saw a train wreck just around the corner.

That train wreck happened in A.D. 70 when Jerusalem was surrounded by Roman soldiers and laid flat to the ground.

At that time, the privileges and endowments God's people had enjoyed and taken for granted were snatched away.

It was one of those "use it or lose it" moments in history.

That was then, but the message of this parable still holds.

For you see, we who have been baptised into Jesus Christ are God's New Covenant people, and like God's ancient people have been given manifold privileges, endowments and responsibilities?

What are we doing with these privileges, endowments and responsibilities? What kind of stewards are we?

Are we burying them or employing them for the greater glory of God and in the service of humankind?

This principle works on a number of levels.

Here, at St. Luke's we are beginning our annual stewardship campaign for 2019. How fortunate we are to have Roger Johnson heading up this effort. But, he can't do it all. We must do our part.

As we consider what our part might be, we might remember words of the missionary poet Charles Studd:

**Only one life, 'twill soon be past,  
Only what's done for Christ will last.**

Surely, as followers of Jesus Christ, it is in this spirit that we must manage the endowments God has given us.

I once heard the story of a man who was very generous with his money. He gave away great sums for the work of the Church in the 1920s. Then came the Great Depression, and he lost all his money.

After which, someone asked him: “Aren’t you sorry you gave away all that money?”

“No,” he said, “all that I have now is what I gave away.” ///

No, doubt, this principle of ‘use it or lose it’ is true not only for individuals, but also for congregations.

I am reminded of a story my father told. When he would come home from work at the end of the day, we would sit down for supper, and, more often than not, we would ask him what had done that day.

At the time, He was the Management Director of the Mississippi Forestry Commission.

One story he told I have never forgotten. It concerned a conversation he had had with a Roman Catholic priest earlier that day.

The priest had told him: **You Protestants build these great educational buildings [this was in the late ‘60s] but you only use them once or twice a week. Is that good stewardship?**

I have never forgotten that conversation. And that is why, after we built St. Luke’s, I was determined that our building – which really is God’s building – would be used throughout the week. That it would be a real community centre. That goal has been for the most part achieved.

Let’s never retreat backward. Use it or loose it.

In a similar vein, Lowell Jacks has given us this wonderful Mason and Hamlin grand piano for concerts. What kind of stewards would we be if we failed to use it? If we said: The community outside of these walls be damned. We are for ourselves.

We are not going to do that, but *what if?* What kind of stewards would we be? What would the logical sequel to such ungracious behaviour? ///

And, of course most important of all, we mustn't sit on the Gospel. We are people on a mission.

What happens when churches forsake the Gospel? When they, for example, give more attention to the United Nations' Millennial Goals than to the cross of Christ?

I will tell you: They wither and die, and that is what we see happening in many of our main-line churches today. /// Use it or lose it.

This principle also holds for the nation. As the world's great superpower, the United States is in a privileged position to show forth God's light to nations . . . to model good order, generosity and civility. Or, we can model opposite of these virtues: bad order, self-centredness and viciousness.

Which will it be? Of late, the latter seems to be the way things are going.

Ancient Israel failed, and Jerusalem fell. What will be our fate?

As we approach our great national day of thanksgiving this coming Thursday, let me encourage you to look up and give thank for all God's blessings. Name them one by one.

But also, pray that at all levels we may be worthy of these blessings. That at the Great Judgment at the end of the Age we may be found wise and faithful stewards of God's bounty. /// And, in the end, hear the words, **“Well done! Thy good and faithful servant**