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“Use It or Lose It”

A sermon by Sam R. Miglarese

33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

November 13, 2011

1 Thess. 5:1–6; Ps. 126; Matt. 25:14–30

Several weeks ago, Lisa Rist, co-chair of our Stewardship Committee, and I were waiting for the rest of our colleagues on the Stewardship Committee, and we began a discussion about the healthcare reimbursement plan. It was open enrollment time, and we were discussing the phrase “Use it or lose it.” For those of you who are aware of those plans, it works this way: you are allowed, at a prescribed limit, to set aside pre-tax dollars for out-of-pocket expenses, whether it is general health, eye care, and dental. The risk is that you have an obligation to budget and project during the course of the year what those expenses might look like. Lisa was concerned that her boys, who are accomplished athletes, have had, over time, a series of injuries that have been costly. She was wondering whether it was appropriate to use this kind of plan to take advantage of the tax-deferred status. But the challenge, of course, with these plans is that if you don’t use it, you lose it, so there is risk involved in the benefit that you receive.

“Use it or lose it” is a phrase that I immediately think of whenever I think about preparing for open enrollment, or dealing with annual leave, etc. Yet, I think it has relevance to the story we just heard. When Joe asked me to preach recently, he did so with the specific intention that I remind you about the congregational dinner this Tuesday, and next Sunday that we walk the walk of Stewardship Sunday, where we stand and place on the Table of the Lord’s Supper and his Word our dedicated commitments to serve, to give, and to support effectively the mission of the church.

I scurried to my Bible to see what the lectionary proposed for me, and by divine providence, like the good Calvinist that I am, I saw this particular text, and I said, “My God, oh my God, this is perfect!” This text supports everything that stewardship is all about. So, as Joe encourages me to preach stewardship, Marilyn reminds me that there are some dangers lurking in these texts. So, she said, “Beware!” I am not exactly sure what dangers she saw lurking in the text, but this was a big one: as I re-read the text, it was clear that this parable is not about you making a sacrificial pledge next Sunday. It really does not deal specifically with raising money for the budget. But what it does do is force us to explore the importance of the spirituality of stewardship in the context of these end of time/return of the King parables in Matthew’s Gospel.

We are at the end time; we are moving towards Advent. We are reflecting on and waiting for and wanting to have the return of the Lord. The Son of Man is going to come in glory, and Jesus tells a series of parables, including this one. The essence of this watching and waiting in the parable really is about the stewarding of all the resources that God has given us. But as you remember, most of the time in which we speak about stewardship, we do so from the perspective of the noble principles of generosity inherent in our hearts of gratitude. We always come to you at this time of the year, and we say, look at the way in which we have been blessed by a gracious God, overwhelmed with a generosity of our God so that we in turn give back a portion of the gifts God has given us.

And yet, today’s reading offers a completely different perspective because the focus is not on using the talents but on the consequences of not using them. Poor Number Three is being punished and thrown out and loses everything and is gnashing his teeth and weeping. What is this? What about this “lose it if you do not use it” component of stewardship?

This is what I learned from this text. We are called upon in the noblest of motives to give out of a generous and grateful heart, but there is also a quality of extrinsic motivation that this text helps us appreciate. I remember my mother many years ago, whenever we were not responsive immediately to her demands, would say to us, “Either you do it, or else.” I never wanted to deal with the “or else.” In what

way are we held up for a reckoning for the way in which we are watching and waiting, entrusted with all of the resources that God has given us?

Threat is not exactly the best motivator for any call to generosity of time and talent and service. In the eyes of Number Three, fear was the motivator: he dug a hole, buried the talent, and returned it in perfect condition to his master, hoping that the hard master would appreciate his cautious attitude.

Recently, I was with a group of Duke students, reflecting on citizenship. Many of these students are very involved in the community: tutors, social innovation projects, all sorts of activities and actions that go well beyond the demands of their normal responsibilities as students and researchers at a university. I asked them, “Why? What is in this? Are you embellishing your resumes? Most of you are freshmen. You have four years to go. Why are you doing this?” As they went through the reasons, there was a level of personal satisfaction they expressed that was a profound witness to me. Some of it was motivated by faith. Much of it was internalized as a real sense of satisfaction.

As you prepare to reflect during the coming weeks on the precious gift of your time in particular, I encourage you to read this story from that perspective because we are always asked, over and over again, to get involved on this committee, this commission, in the city of Durham, in the non-profit world, within our own community of faith. Sometimes, we need to be nudged and pushed and cajoled, but when we do accept the invitation to serve, you put yourself out there. In doing so there is a return to you of the personal satisfaction of a job well done.

Normally, we are inspired by the noble gift of giving from a heart full of gratitude, and at other times we need to be reminded that if we not do return an “increase” to a gift given, we suffer consequences of a diminished life. I encourage you to come to the congregational dinner on Tuesday. I encourage you to present your pledge cards on Dedication Sunday you are going to receive in the mail this week. Do it not out of being threatened with accountability, but from the deepest heart of gratitude for the blessings that you have received. We are all called to build up the body of Christ together and trust the treasure of his Love entrusted to us all. Amen.