

November 19, 2023

NOT A WINNING STRATEGY

Scripture: Matthew 25: 14 – 30

There are occasions in the Gospels when Jesus was moved to describe some folks in rather unflattering and uncomplimentary terms.

For example, on several occasions, Jesus described the scribes and Pharisees as hypocrites. If you read Matthew 23, in that one chapter alone, Jesus calls the scribes and Pharisees hypocrites over five times. He described them as being blind and lawless. He says they are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but, on the inside, are full of the bones of the dead and all kinds of filth. He also calls them snakes and a brood of vipers.

Pretty harsh words, but words that were spoken not in condemnation; but in rebuke. Words that were not intended to put down and belittle but to expose and challenge.

There are times when one has to wipe the smile from one's face and say it as it is because love demands no less. The act of redemption requires that the truth be told, and people have to be made to see the truth in order for them to seek change.

But it is one thing to expose and be harsh with someone in the hope that the person will be corrected and will seek to change; it is quite another thing to reach the point where you give up on someone, where you feel that the person is no longer worth anything.

Of all the unflattering things that Jesus said about the scribes and Pharisees, none compares to what the master, in the parable of the talents, said of his slave who buried the money that was entrusted to him. He called him wicked, lazy and worthless. Pretty harsh words indeed.

To be called wicked or lazy is bad enough, but to be called worthless is the worst thing that can be said of anyone. To be called worthless is, in effect, to write you off; it is to say that you are of no value. That is what that servant with the one talent was considered to be by his master- worthless – good for nothing. What did he do to deserve such a harsh condemnation?

From reading the parable, we see that it was not what he did that brought on such condemnation; it was what he did not do. He was not called worthless because he tried and failed at investing his master's money; he was called worthless because he failed to try – and he failed to try because he was afraid of failure.

The fear of failure is a very real fear that cripples a lot of people. There are many who can do a whole lot more; many who have gifts and abilities that lie untapped, resources that are unutilized, and ideas that remain unexplored, all because of the fear of failure.

The fear of failure paralyzes. It makes us worry about what other people may think about us; it makes us doubt our ability to pursue the future we desire; it causes us to question whether we are smart enough, or capable enough, or good enough. The fear of failure makes us afraid that we may disappoint those whose opinions and validation we seek and value. And so the fear of failure causes us to only attempt those things that we are sure will succeed.

The man with the one talent knew what his master expected, but he did nothing because he was afraid of failure. He decided to play it safe, so he buried the money his master entrusted to him. He thought he was being safe, but he ended up losing everything.

Playing it safe because of fear, is seldom ever a winning strategy; it more often causes us to lose out on what is possible. We lose out on the satisfaction of seeing ourselves grow. We lose out on the excitement of discovering and uncovering new things. We miss out on the adventure of exploring new paths. We limit ourselves to what is, rather than pursuing what can be. We stagnate ourselves, rather than release our potential. And we end up being the poorer for not trying.

Failure is a normal part of learning and growth, and we must not be afraid of failure. The possibility of failure only confirms the fact that we are human, and as Theodore Roosevelt said: “The only person who makes no mistakes is the person who never does anything.

The man with the one talent was afraid of failing - so he did nothing. He decided to play it safe. But what he did not understand was that playing it safe is seldom ever a winning strategy. It may keep you in the game for a while, but it seldom makes you win.

We cannot get far in life if we only want to play it safe. As someone nicely puts it: “You can never cross the ocean until you have the courage to lose sight of the shore”.

As people of God, we have important and urgent work to do. It is good that we can worship together. It is good that we can enjoy times of fellowship with each other. And we should do all that we can to preserve those things. But we are called to be and to do much more than that.

We are called to represent God in the world – to reflect God’s love and justice, God’s peace and compassion. To care for others. To stand in contrast to that which deprives, dehumanizes and destroys. To work for reconciliation and wholeness. To call people to repentance and right relationships.

The business of God’s Church is serious and important business, and we are able to do it not because we are experts at what we do, but because we are willing to stand in our weakness and vulnerability, with our limitations and uncertainties, and say here I am

Lord, use me. We are willing to acknowledge before God that we are really not sure how much we can do, or even what to do, but we sure are willing to try.

As people of God, we are called to be people of daring faith. To step out, not because we are confident about the outcome, but to step out even when we can't see the end. To attempt great things even when our resources are meagre. To be driven by our faith in God, not our fear of failure.

God has given us gifts, abilities and resources, and God expects us to invest what we have, however much or little it is, in making lives better and in working for people to experience the Kingdom of God. And that is not likely to happen if we only want to play it safe.

If our main strategy is to hoard the little that we have – our time, our gifts, our abilities and our resources, then we might as well save ourselves the trouble, because that has seldom ever proven to be a winning strategy.

God does not ask us to perform miracles; all God asks of us is that we do our best with what we have.

Thanks be to God.

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