

Sunday Morning, July 30, 1967

Sermon Subject: "HIDING BEHIND THE SKIRT OF 'BEING LITTLE'"

James Russell Lowell said, "No man is born in this world whose work is not born with him." Christ might have put it this way: "To everyone was given a ~~power~~ ^{talent}."

It's a curious fact that the most prominent obstacle that stands in the way of progress toward spiritual maturity is the lack of belief in ourselves. It is not a lack of belief in God, but a lack of belief in ourselves. I have encountered very few people who do not believe in God, but I have met by the multitudes people who do not believe in themselves. We're on the fringe of a period when some of our most radical theologians expressed the fact that God no longer lived in our generation. I noted a sign on a church bulletin board last week. It read: "My God's alive/ sorry about yours."

For there are not many of us who are in that group without any God...without a belief in God. But we're in great company with one another when we profess a lack of belief in ourselves. That's where the problem really starts. For you see, without a belief in ourselves and confident in the fact that God can use me, then we are prone to stand back in the shadows and wait for other people to do the things that need to be done. Here is where that expression, "Let George do it." was born.

Jesus anticipated this. It seems to me that the Scriptures show an anticipation of almost every condition in which man finds himself, and this is no exception. For by the very way in which he lived his own life, indicates the extreme value that God puts on the little and the insignificant. For example, the stories that he told. Who emerged as the hero of these stories? It was a despised Samaritan that history would call good. It was a wastral lad who came back home begging for a place that he had given up. In the companies that he kept, the Scripture says that the common people responded to him. They were the ones with whom he moved and loved...and had companionship. Surely there were many of such cultural stature and educational stature that Jesus could have selected them and ignored the fishermen like Peter and Andrew, ignored a publican like Levi, and Zacheus could have stayed in that tree longingly looking into the face of one who could give him dignity and meaning to his life. These are the ones Jesus chose with whom to live.

And predating that, God, Himself, showed that by the standards of greatness that we have elaborated upon, there is no meaning for Him. When the time came that he was to intrude into the mind of the world, he bypassed all the crowned heads of the world. He found an insignificant little man by the name of Abraham, and he said to him, "You are to become the father of the children that I shall call my own." One day he confronted a little man who was watching livestock on the side of a hill, gathering together the fruit of the sycamore trees. And he sent him into the city to preach one of the greatest sermons that's printed in the Old Testament. And on another hillside, he found another man taking care of the ~~hillside~~ ^{livestock}...stammering, couldn't even speak clearly to God...begged that God not select him for a special task, but God took him by the shoulder and led him down into Egypt and made him stand before the greatest power of the world...the Pharaoh of Egypt. It's the little men, the insignificant things upon which the great power and structure of the church has been built.

What great hope that affords us, for as Abraham Lincoln said, "God must love homely people, for he made so many of them." It's true as well that God must love the ~~un~~ ^{one} talented men, because he made so many of us. And to each of us he gave a responsibility. Jesus told a parable that would illustrate this. He said that on one occasion the master was to leave his place and he gave charge to three of his servants to carry on his business until he returned, and he divided the business proportionately into 5 and 2 and 1 segment of the business. And he said to each of them, "Now you are to carry on in my absence, and when I return, I want to hear how you have done. I want

you to give an account of the talents that I've placed in your care." And when he did return, the man who had the 5 talents said, "Lord, I have been working while you were away. I have served you faithfully. Here are the 5 talents you gave to me, and I've increased them until I return to you 10 instead of 5." And then he came to the next man, and he too had put himself favorably in the sight of his Master by applying himself worthily and showing dividends for his labors. But then came he to the man who had the one talent, and here is where Jesus, in the telling of the parable, strikes home with most of us. Then man said, "Lord, I feared because I knew that you were an exacting master, so I took the one talent that you gave me, and fearful that I couldn't handle it...that I couldn't do what you'd have done with that one talent, I carefully folded it in a napkin and layed it away for safekeeping, and now that you're here, I've unfolded the napkin, and here's the talent just as you gave it to me." Well, the master was very indignant over this. He said, "If I'd wanted safekeeping, I could have cared for that. I didn't want safekeeping, I wanted production. I wanted you to use it and to produce with it as I would have had I been here." Now comes one of the severest denunciations that Jesus has called out on any person, and he ends it by saying, "He shall be cast into outer darkness." What a severe penalty simply because one took care of that which had been entrusted to him and returned it just as he had received it. And how important it is for us to realize that God doesn't dare let our talents lie dormant, but that they must be used...that they must produce.

Of course, we can't all produce on the same level. There are some of us who are more talented than others. It's presumptuous of us to believe that I can do anything just as well as anybody else can do it, ~~but~~ Perhaps there is a person who could do the appointed task better than you and I could do it, but when we're called upon to do it, that's no excuse for us. It becomes our own, and the superiority of some other person and his ability does not alleviate us from the responsibility that is given to us. We must use what we have to produce as we are called to serve. Perhaps you heard the story of the maid who became a little slovenly in her housework. Her employer called her on the carpet, and pointing to a nearby table covered with dust, she said, "Look at that table. I can write my name in the dust on that table." And with that, the maid beamed and said, "That's wonderful. I couldn't do that. Just goes to show you what an education will do for you." We can't all write names, but we can all see the dust, and that's what God demands...that we see the dust and we go to work.

The severity of Jesus in facing this one man who had the talent that he did not use is based upon three observations that Jesus made. The first of these is that the one-talent man usurped the authority of his master by his own authority. What a commonplace error that is in life...rejecting the authority of God and replacing it with an authority of our own. The first line of an old hymn that we no longer sing goes, "Trust and Obey, For there's no other way." Now this isn't to say that we must never question or search or try to resolve with the inquiry of our minds when we're called upon to something. Ours is not necessarily to do or die without asking the reason why, but we are called upon to obey...to acknowledge the authority of God and be faithful to him. Jonah is a prime example of a man who tried to escape the commandment of God. God very carefully laid out the plan that Jonah was to be a part of and Jonah didn't want to do it. And simply because he didn't want to do it, he decided in lieu of God's commandment as to what course he would follow, and so he went off in an opposite direction from the way God called him to go. Remember Namon the leper. He came to one of the prophets afflicted with leprosy with the hope that he might be cleansed. And the prophet said to him, "Go over to the River Jordan, and dip yourself in the river seven times, and then you'll be healed." But Namon was indignant, because the River Jordan was a dirty river, and he said, "Why should I go over here and dip myself 7 times in the River Jordan. I'll go back to Damascus where the river is clean, and I'll dip myself in that water." And he went away establishing his own authority for healing rather than the authority of God, and thus he lost his healing. The real power of the life of Christ came into focus on the night that he spent in Gethsamane. Quite obviously, here was a conflict of wills. We can't know

just to what depth the will of Christ had been ingrained in himself. But quite obviously he had an alternative to the course that he was to follow, for he said, "Lord, if you can resolve it with your will to let this cup that's been drawn for me to be passed, then let it be passed. I just don't want to do it. Isn't there another way?" But then he ended on these words: "But not my will, but yours be done." I think quite likely in every instance when God calls us to a specific duty that we have an alternative in our minds, but we dare not build on the alternative, forgoing the discipline...direction from God. That's one of the major problems that facing America today. In the major cities of America there is a seething hatred...riots breaking out in the ghettos of the city, reaching out into the responsible neighborhood business districts. As one segment of the American community says, "I don't believe in the law, so I'm going to break it to suit myself." We dare not take that attitude. We were given that direction some time ago when we were told that if the law is unpopular, don't feel morally obligated to keep that law. Laws are made to provide for peace and tranquillity. We dare not take the law in our own hands lest we destroy ourselves, for if we were to take an attitude of one law here, there would be as many attitudes as there would be individuals approaching. And so we are bound together to authority to which we must respond...and to be faithful. If it's true here in the community of men, how much more true when we have a far greater than the authority of man in the authority of God. The direction that's being imposed on so many of us today in the moral realm particularly confronting our young people when we talk about a new morality that doesn't have the same restrictions as the morality of the past. And so, not willing to follow according to the moral standards of the past, we create a new ethic. We establish new mores, and we think that everything's all right, because everyone's in agreement on it, and it's built upon our own limited authority, refusing to recognize the higher authority of God. So Jesus very severely criticized this man, because he substituted his will for the will of God.

The second reason that Jesus was so severe upon him was because he was not aggressive in his relationship with his master. Rather than being on the offensive, he was on the defensive, and the church cannot live on the defensive, it must be on the offensive, moving out, setting the tone, showing the direction. Rather than constantly hiding in the shadows, defending itself against the world, apologising for it's even being in existence. The early Christian writers wrote papers establishing their own ideas and their own theology, trying to let other people outside of the church know what the church really stands for. The name of these papers was called "The Apologetics." The writers were apologists. And it seems as though we have taken the same word and have changed its meaning, and today we've become apologetic about what we stand for. And we are apologists about being Christians in the first place...not proud, but keeping that in the background of our lives. I'm a great fan of college football. A few years ago my alma mater, the University of Tennessee, was going through a period they called 'rebuilding', and so they had a good defensive team, but nothing in offense. And the only hope of winning a game was to keep the other team from scoring. Now that's not an enjoyable way to play football. After a few years they developed an offense, and now the other team had to defend against us. Now we were playing football. The church needs to play football with an offensive as well as a defensive unit. Like a mighty army moves the church of God....That's what we were meant to be...to be on the offensive...to move ahead...to strike for the Kingdom of God. So because this man refused to move out and become involved, but rather to maintain the status quo, Christ was very severe upon him. The thing is, he didn't produce. It was exactly as it had been given to him when he returned it back to his master. And yet, could it be possible at the end of our lives when God demands to know of us what we had achieved in the spiritual realm that we would place back before him our talents exactly as he gave them to us at the moment of our birth. I think it's quite likely, and when it's done, we can already hear the condemnation of our Lord. One one occasion, Jesus and his disciples were walking through the countryside, and they were weary and hungry, and then their faces brightened up as they saw in the distance a flowering fig tree. It was green and ripe and healthy. They began to anticipate the pleasure that would come to them when they reached that fig tree. They would sit in the cool shadows and eat of the ripe fruit. But then they got there

and they ~~decided~~^{DISCOVERED} that it was all show. Everything was on the outside, but there was no fruit on it. Because the tree had not borne fruit, a curse was put upon it and it withered in the hot sun. We are told that a bad tree cannot bear good fruit, and by the fruit that is produced, you can know the tree. Our lives must be fruitful wherever they call us to serve. When an opportunity arises, we must take advantage of that opportunity. When our talents are called into action, we must not hesitate or falter, but with the instruments of service that we have move out and offer ourselves, as limited as we may be, but willing to be used for the purposes for which we were born.

And now this. Perhaps the greatest fault of all was the fact that he didn't even try. Given the talent, he folded it carefully into a napkin, and put it securely away. There's nothing wrong with failure when one has tried. I heard this past week about a man who returned to his hometown after having been away many years. He returned for a school reunion. And over the years they had had reunions and he had been invited, but nobody had heard from him. No one knew where he was or what he was doing. And now on this day when he walked into the group of his old classmates, everyone realized immediately that he was quite successful...the way that he carried himself, the way that he was dressed. And then they learned from him that he indeed was quite successful with assets lying in the millions of dollars. And then someone said to him, "Well tell us about it. Where did it come from? How did you achieve such success." And he looked him in the eye and said, "Over the years that you have not heard about me, twelve times I've gone bankrupt. I failed completely and lost everything that I had. But each time I got up and tried all over again. I paid off the debts that I owed when I went into bankruptcy, and then I started climbing again and twelve times I failed and went back to rock bottom before I was able to make a go of it." There's nothing wrong with honest failure. The real trouble is when you don't even try.

God gave you a talent. What have you done with it?