

## Wesley United Methodist Church

August 11, 2013

"Faith in Action."

Luke 12:35-48, Hebrews 11:1-12,

There was a wealthy family from Massachusetts who used to take a month's vacation every summer to the coast of Maine, taking their maid with them. The maid had an annual ritual at the beach. She wore an old-fashioned bathing suit, complete with a little white hat, and carried enough paraphernalia to stock Wal-Mart. She would settle herself on the beach, cover every inch of exposed skin and journey down to the water's edge. There she would hesitate while taking deep breaths. Slowly she would work up her courage to enter into the ice-cold water. Finally, she would daintily extend one foot and lower it slowly into the water until she barely had her big toe submerged. Then she repeated the act with the other foot. Then, having satisfied her minimal urge for a swim, she would retreat to her chair and umbrella and spend the remainder of the vacation curled around a book.

She reminds me of many Christians I have known. They have the stuff of greatness in them, but they never really wade into the waters of Christian discipleship. Maybe a toe. Sometimes an ankle, but rarely do they become so stirred up with the Spirit of God that they venture anything great for God.

They are like a car whose transmission is locked in neutral. The sound of the motor is impressive. The lights and the radio work fine. The tread on their tires is brand new. They are shiny and they are attractive. The only problem is that they are not going anywhere. They settle for being only nominal followers of Christ.

Clarence Jordan, the great activist saint of God who inspired the musical, *The Cotton Patch Gospel*, believed such people violated the Third Commandment, "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord your God in vain." He said taking the Lord's name in vain was not something you do with your lips (by uttering profanity), "but with your life. You take the name of the Lord in vain when you accept the name of Jesus Christ but don't do anything with it."

One of the great unspoken commandments of the Scripture is that we are to make our lives count for something. We are accountable for our actions. We are called to have dominion over our own destinies. As Adam was to have dominion over his world, so are we. We are not reeds blown by every wind, or rocks unmoving or unmovable. We are to be responsible men and women who recognize that God has entrusted us with the precious gift of freedom. With that freedom God has given us opportunities untold to alter our circumstances, adjust our situations and improve our lives. We are free to make our life count for something.

Jesus wants his followers to be productive. That's the first thing we need to see. In today's Scripture he tells a parable about a wise and faithful servant whom his master left in charge of his household. How happy the master will be, Jesus tells us, if he returns and finds the servant living up to his responsibilities. And that's what Christ desires of each of us to live up to our responsibilities to make productive use of our time. Did you know that some people sleep away between one half to two thirds of their lives?

It is the productive person whom Jesus lauded time and time again. Jesus closed this particular parable by adding, "To whom much is given, much will be expected."

That's the basic message of the parable of the talents. Those who put their talents to work were praised and their talents were increased, but the poor fellow who buried his talent in the ground had even the one talent taken from him (Matthew 25:14-30).

In another parable, there is even an unscrupulous servant who found out he was being fired and used his master's money to buy friends. To his disciples' surprise, Jesus lauded the man's ingenuity (Luke 16:1-18). At least he didn't sit around whining that life had been unfair to him. He took charge of his situation and Jesus praised him.

There is a rather amusing scene in the Book of Exodus. The children of Israel are up against the Red Sea. The army of Pharaoh is hot on their heels. Moses is exhorting the people to trust in God that God will not forsake them. God breaks in on Moses' exhortation. As the Living Bible paraphrases it, God says to Moses, "Quit praying and get the people moving forward, march!" (Exodus 14:15) There is a time for praying, but there is also a time for moving forward. There is no virtue in standing still.

"What good is a tree," asks Jesus, "if it does not bear good fruit?" (Matthew 7:19) "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,'" he asks in Luke 6:46, "and do not do what I say?" Jesus calls his people to be productive. He wants us to use our brains and use our energies. He wants us to dream dreams and move mountains.

Bill Borden, son of the famous and wealthy Borden family, went to China as a missionary. There he died of an oriental disease. At his bedside they found a note he had written while he was dying. On it were these words: "No reserve, no retreat, no regrets." I'm sure Jesus loved Bill Borden. "No reserve, no retreat, no regrets." Jesus wanted his disciples to be productive.

That's the meaning of faith. Faith is not belief based on intellectual premise. Faith is action based on an eternal promise. That is the message of Hebrews 11. The writer begins with Cain and Abel as he shows how by faith the great men of old received the blessings of God. From Abel to Abraham he shows how God is faithful to those who walk according to his purpose. One of the names included in that list is that of Enoch. Missing is the name of Enoch's son Methuselah. Methuselah, you will remember, lived 969 years. That's all we know about him. He lived longer than anyone has ever lived. But as far as we know his life made no other impact than that he lived a long time.

God calls his people to be productive, to be powerful. He calls us to make our lives count. To take charge.

Another word people use nowadays is "passionate." What is your passion? Motivational speakers tell us we will be successful if we will follow our passion. And that is true.

I was reading recently about the famous writer of Western novels, Louis L'Amour. At one time L'Amour was one of the world's most popular writers. He wrote 89 novels, over 250 short stories, and sold more than 320 million copies of his work. His writings were translated into over 20 languages.

Such production didn't come out of half-hearted effort. L'Amour constantly searched for factual material to fill his novels. Once, he found an abandoned cabin whose occupants seventy years earlier had used newspaper to insulate the structure against frigid winds. He spent days removing this home-made insulation. He took the newspapers home and gleaned enough facts for two stories. This was not an isolated incident. By the time L'Amour started a novel, he was armed with copies of every topographical map, relief map, and mine chart that existed on the area covered in his story. "My description must be right," he insists, "when I tell my reader about a well in the desert, he knows it's there, and that the water is good to drink."

Once, for \$3 a day, he agreed to help an 80-year-old trapper who had been hired to skin all of the dead cattle on a rancher's spread. "There were 925 of them, and some had been dead for a while," L'Amour remembered later. "Nobody else would come near the place," he said. "But the old man had a story to tell: he had been kidnapped by Apaches when he was seven years old and

had been brought up as one of them. He had ridden with the great chiefs Nana and Geronimo." L'Amour concludes, "I had him all to myself for three months and got a lot of material for books I wrote later: Hondo, Shalako, and The Skyliners." That's passion. Would you be willing to skin 925 cattle, some of them dead for some time, in order to glean a few facts? That's why Louis L'Amour was at the top of his profession. What is it that you have a passion for?

In our culture it is ok to be passionate about anything except religion, except your faith, except your relationship with God. I can go to a rock concert, or a political rally or a baseball game and I can yell my head off. I can get excited. I can get hoarse from yelling too loud. When my team loses I can cry. Nobody thinks that's a big deal. When my team wins I can jump up and dance in the bleachers and wave my hands in the air. If I do that at a game people say, 'She is a real fan.' If I do that in church people say, 'She is a fanatic! She is a nut case.' You don't want to get too emotional about your faith. It's ok about anything else, but not that. I think we all can relate to that, and it's a crying shame. That's what is missing in many of us. We have no great driving passion for God. It is not that we are bad people. Actually, we desire to be better than we are. But we would rather not get excited about it. We are not all that happy with our lives, but then why rock the boat? No passion no power.

There is one more descriptive word that I want to point out and that is "prepared." The master leaves the servant in charge until he returns. He expects the servant to be prepared to give an accounting of his stewardship.

Friends, if the Master were to return today and were to ask us to give an accounting of our lives, would we be prepared? There are some people, good people, salt of the earth people who will have nothing to show the Master. They were nice enough. They didn't get into any real trouble. But they made no real contribution to their world, to their community, to their church. They just kind of blended into the landscape for their three score and ten years.

The words of the Master at the end of today's Scripture are somewhat haunting, "Unto whom much is given, much is required," they will come as an awful judgment to anyone who is not prepared. Do you measure up? Amen.