

SERMONS

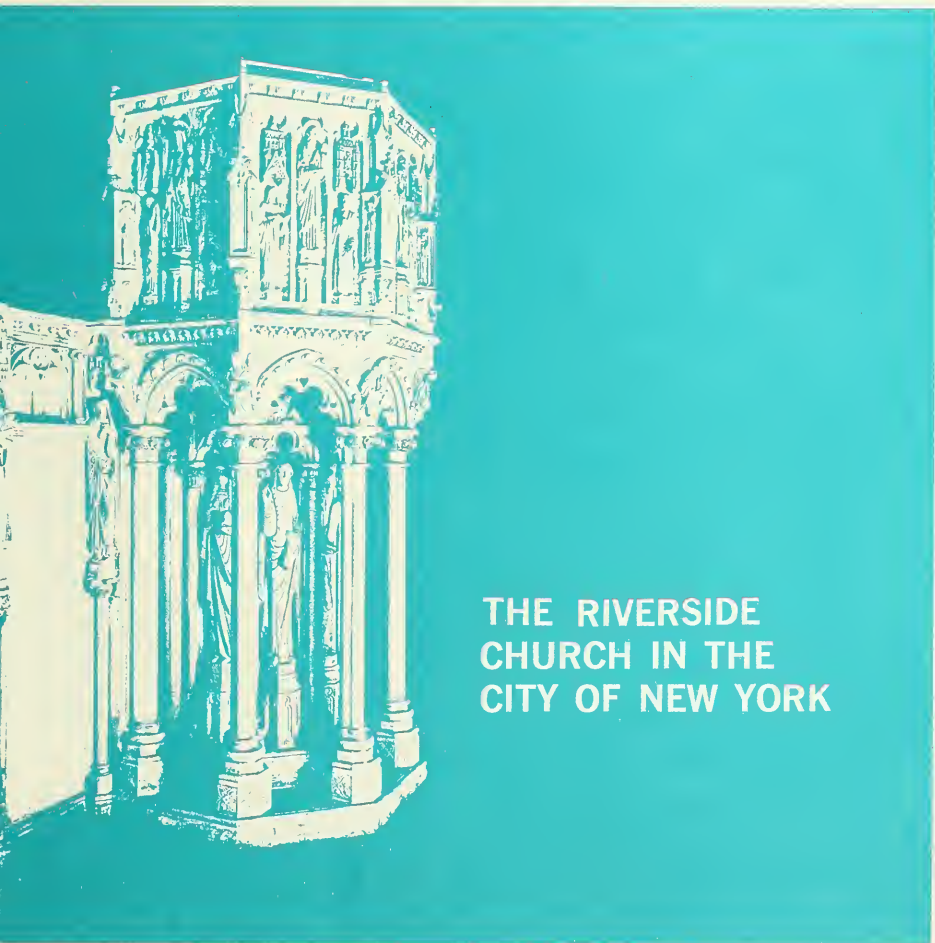
FROM RIVERSIDE

HANGING BACK

*" . . . I was afraid, and I went and hid
your talent in the ground."*


(Matt. 25:25)

Dr. Ernest T. Campbell



THE RIVERSIDE
CHURCH IN THE
CITY OF NEW YORK

JULY 8, 1973



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2012 with funding from
Princeton Theological Seminary Library

HANGING BACK

*" . . . I was afraid, and I went and hid
your talent in the ground."*

Matt. 25:25

Graffiti can be vulgar. Graffiti can be humorous. And, on occasion, graffiti can be used in the service of truth. A friend reports seeing on a wall these words: "I am neither for nor against apathy!"

One senses that America at present is in the throes of a crisis of monumental importance. It is a crisis in morale. The question before the populace is whether to act or quit.

We have learned by now that Watergate is more than a harmless caper or political prank. It is clear that men highly placed in government have been playing a private game of Monopoly at public expense. They have put themselves above the law and kept the nation at the mercy of doctored news releases and bogus pronouncements. Whether they will draw the card, "Go to jail - Go directly to Jail," remains to be seen!

What's worse, the suspicion grows with every rap of Sam Ervin's gavel that Watergate is but the tip of an iceberg that represents a widespread sickness in the American way of life.

The Watergate phenomenon will induce in us one of two reactions: We will resolve to put our best efforts on the line to change the situation, or we will, in understandable disgust and disillusionment, decide to quit.

* * *

Jesus' parable of the talents is essentially the story of a man who resolved to quit. In the story a man of means goes away on a far journey. Before

leaving he entrusts his operation to three servants. To one he gives five talents, to another two, and to a third, one. After a "long time," as the record has it, the master of those servants comes and settles accounts with them. He discovers that the man who had been given five talents has made five more, and that the man who had been given two talents has reproduced those two.

But the focus of the story falls on the man to whom one talent had been given. When the master stands before this faltering servant to inquire of his talent the man replies: "Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not winnow; so I was afraid and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours."

The five-talent man and the two talent man each received the same response from the master: "Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much." But the master was thoroughly displeased with the one-talent man. He dressed him down - "You wicked and slothful servant." He faulted his judgement - "You ought to have invested my money with the bankers and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest." He punished him for his cowardice -- "Take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten."

We cringe at the severity. In fact, we tend underneath to sympathize with the one-talent man against the master. (Perhaps because we sense that in his indictment we stand indicted ourselves.) So, in defense of the single-talent man we ask, why all the stir? He was only being cautious. Could he help it if he had a conservative disposition? Besides, he had not lost anything. What was given him, he had kept intact. Clearly he had not taken his talent and dissipated it in acts of wild extravagance, like the prodigal son in the far country. We burn with resent-

ment. "What had he done,?" we ask. The answer is, "Nothing." And that's just it!! "I was afraid and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours."

* * *

Jesus here is exposing a fatally flawed attitude toward life. Withheld good can be as great a sin as perpetrated evil! Maybe more so. It is one thing to play and lose. It is quite another matter to determine not to play at all. There is such a thing as a fatal attitude toward life.

When one examines the man's testimony closely he sees that this attitude toward life rests on two foundations, fear and a perverted view of God. Clearly it rested on fear. He opens his defense with some unconvincing remarks about his master: "I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow." But presently he comes to the point, "I was afraid." This is the fear of failure. Basically he held that life could not be trusted with his initiatives. He felt that if you cast your bread on the waters it would sink! That life really is not responsive to man's noblest efforts. Dan Otto Via, Jr., puts it this way, "His verbal expression of fear and his refusal to risk action are an implicit accusation against life itself. They show that he viewed the universe as inimical to the human enterprise and saw self-defensive non-action, therefore, as the appropriate course to take in life."¹ This is to live defensively like old Peachum in the Threepenny Opera, who says, "The wickedness of the world is so great you have to run your legs off to avoid having them stolen from under you."²

Last month I strayed upon a copy of "The Evening Star-Daily News" of Washington, D. C. My eye was attracted to a cartoon by Brickman showing the despair of a harried citizen in three different panels. In box one he says, "Wire-tapping, inflation, taxes, investigation." In box two simply, "Hoo Boy!" In box three,

"My whole life has become a series of circumstances beyond my control."³ "Nothing ventured, nothing gained," was too steep for the one-talent man. He chose instead, "Nothing risked, nothing lost."

What is fear basically but a lack of faith, a lack of trust in the faithfulness of God and the responsiveness of life? Moltmann in his Theology of Hope reminds us that in the last look of the Bible where those who have resisted the will of God are enumerated by categories, those who are "cowardly" and "faithless" come before the polluted and the murders and the fornicators and the sorcerers and the idolaters and the liars. (Rev. 21:8) The cowardly first and the faithless second! Withheld good can be as great a sin as perpetrated evil.

The other foundation on which this philosophy rests is a perverted view of God. There is no questioning the fact that the master in the story stands for God. As the story nears its climax it shows man before the tribunal of the Almighty. Notice the distortion: "I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not winnow." Sometimes our theology is used to justify our attitude toward life. How come he felt this way about God while the other two did not? The man with ten talents could have blown an awful lot more. The man with two talents could have blown double the amount that this fearful soul was given. Why were they not afraid? How come they did not see the master in a hard light? What we have here is a projection on to God of a man's own fears!

But this view of God is false. Alfred North Whitehead was intent on getting us disabused of false notions of God that have plagued Christian theology over the years. The major distortions in Whitehead's judgment were three. First, God as the "unmoved mover" who is in no sense acted upon. Second, God as the "ruling Cesar" who controls (as it were from outside) a creation which he shoves about with no respect for

its own particular decisions. Third, God as the "ruthless moralist" who imposes laws which bear little relationship to the created occasions, above all to the human persons, who are supposed to obey them.⁴

It is a warranted simplification to say that from the Biblical point of view we are to understand God as a father to be loved and a worker to be joined. That's the gist of it, isn't it? When we meet Him initially in Genesis He is at work creating. He is a father to be loved and a worker to be joined, not a ruthless moralist to be feared.

The one-talent man by his lack of initiative distanced himself from God. Acts can be forgiven, but even God cannot forgive the hanger back!

* * *

The point that Jesus makes in this story has meaning for me as a person. It is at the very least good psychology. Too many of us are hung up and constricted. We underlive our potential. We ought to get the talent out of the ground and turn it loose to see if something can happen with it.

I will always be grateful for the teacher who gave us our first course in Public Speaking. We were a bunch of nervous collegians at that time, acutely self-conscious and not particularly anxious to get up and talk before our classmates. I recall that for the first month we did not stand up to say anything. Instead we had to get up in turn and act out a pantomime. It is very difficult to act out a pantomime and stay tight. One must be loosened up in order to speak out.

I feel sorry for anyone who has never played stick-ball. I learned that game down here in Morningside Park many years ago. I learned with a bunch of older fellows and to tell you the truth, I was always afraid that I wouldn't make contact with the ball. So, I

shortened up on the broom handle. What I hit were little darters going between short and third, or weak humpback line drives going out over the second baseman's head. I never knew the thrill of socking that Spalding ball until I took the advice of an older cousin who said, "hold the thing down at the end and swing full." I did. And what a sweet feeling it was! I would sit through five or six hours of grade school day after day just waiting for another chance to get that feeling in my hands again.

One will never learn how bouyant water is and how much fun swimming can be while hanging on to the edge of a pool! One will never know what a thrill it is to ride a roller coaster by sitting in a ferris wheel!

This is quite a sin, to underlive life. One doesn't have to be a gangster, or a burgler to displease God. Just take what you have and bury it and underlive your potential. Stay only with the subjects that you know. Stay close to the friends you already have. Never break loose and launch out.

"I knew you to be a hard man, so I was afraid and I went and hid your talent in the ground." This word of Jesus has some meaning for me as a citizen of this republic. I am terribly concerned about the choice, indicated earlier, that is now facing all of us in this land. The question of whether a few more weeks of the Watergate hearings will make us throw up our hands and abandon the field to others or produce in us a determination to become more involved than ever.

Not the longest, but probably the most moving book I read during my vacation was Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's Nobel Lecture. The story of this man is so well known that I need not recount it except to say that he was a harried and oppressed Russian author who has an appreciation for freedom that some of us do not have because we have never

been without it. He is very much aware from personal experience of what can happen in a society when people turn to their own personal successing and forego concern for life around them. He calls that the "spirit of Munich."

Solzhenitsyn writes, "The spirit of Munich is an illness of the will of prosperous people. It is the daily state of those who have given themselves over to their thirst for well-being at no matter what cost, to material prosperity as the principal goal of life on earth. Such people -- and there are a multitude of them in the world of today -- choose passivity and retreat, anything so that their accustomed life should continue undisturbed, anything so as not to have to cross over into hardship today, while tomorrow, they hope, will take care of itself."⁵ The spirit of Munich could very well be our most sinister temptation as a people today.

It has been observed that with the disappearance of "Life" we have now lost, apart from news magazines, the last regularly published magazine of general interest to everyone. The trend today is toward periodicals about boating or hunting or wine or homes or making money or consumer reports and the like. Which means that we are gradually making a retreat from the general to the particular and to the personal.

Is it not true that those who think grimly of New York City are those who are fundamentally disengaged? I have in mind people who sit and watch the television news every night to passively discover what new disasters have befallen us. Those of us who have some heart about the city and some faith in its future are people who have at least a small piece of the action. Once you take that talent and bury it and determine to live defensively, you are finished! You might just as well cash your talent in! Take it from him and give it to him who has ten. And let life go on!

"Master, I knew you to be a hard man. So I was

afraid and I went and hid your talent in the ground." Obviously there is something very important in all of this for the Christian. There is no mistaking that this is one of what the scholars call the parousia parables. It was a word that Jesus gave to his disciples shortly before He left. That's why you find it in Matthew 25, toward the end of the Gospel. He is leaving. Just as the nobleman went on a long journey, so Jesus is about to go. The analogy is plain. In the interim they weren't simply to mark time or twiddle their thumbs, they were to occupy until he came and invest and give their initiatives to the world.

This particular parable was aimed specifically at the Scribes who had taken what might be called a protectionist attitude toward their religion. They considered themselves guardians of orthodoxy. What excited them was not new truth but the discovery of some heresy that they could stamp out. God was trying to get the Hebrew people to universalize their gifts, to share them with the world.

The Church as the new Israel was to release what it had to the nations. Faith, my friends, was never meant to dead-end with you. You were not meant to be a "catch-basin" for God's grace, you were meant to be a conduit. The word by which we have been saved by the grace of God seeks new hearers and the Spirit who lives in us seeks still new and other dwelling places.

When we ask ourselves about the demise of the church and turn mournfully to the sociologist to read his obituary notice we are failing to recognize that much of our trouble comes from the inside -- withheld initiatives, talents in the ground. "I was afraid and I hid it." When enough people are afraid and enough people "hide it" the end is not distant.

Let's get it straight. Despite all that has been said by secular theologians about the heroism of

modern man, no one anywhere is doing alright without God! This city is hurting for love. Hurting for justice. Hurting for righteousness. If you've got some of it turn it loose. Don't say "well the city would never respond to what I can do." That's God's problem how the city responds. Your job is to turn it loose and get it out of the ground and working. Say something about his love in the letters that you write, in the conversations that you hold and the contacts that you make. Ask God to help you recover a sense of the relevancy of Jesus Christ for every man.

When Paul Tillich was 15 years of age and received into full membership of the church, he was required to select a text from the Bible that best expressed his understanding of the Christian faith. He was astonished at the mixed reactions that developed around the verse he chose. It was this, "Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest." Reflecting later in life on his embarrassed inability to explain the choice which he nevertheless felt was a good one, he said, "Every child is right in responding immediately to those words. Every adult is right in responding to them in all periods of his life, and under all the conditions of his internal and external history. These words of Jesus are universal and fit every human being and every human situation. They are simple; they grasp the heart of the primitive as well as that of the profound, disturbing the mind of the wise."

"I was afraid and went and hid your talent in the ground." This is not what God wants of us as persons. This is not what God wants of us as citizens. This is not what God wants of us as Christians. He wants us to hang loose, to come forward, and to let it out!

CLOSING PRAYER

Forgive us, O God, that we have
been so nice, so safe, so cautious,
so respectable in our response to Thee.

Make us more daring in word and deed.

And all to the end that our initiatives,
however poorly offered, may be useful
unto Thee,

Through Jesus Christ Our Lord

Who loved us and gave Himself for us.

Amen.

FOOTNOTES

1. Via, Dan Otto, Jr., The Parables, p. 119, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1946.
2. Brecht, Bertolt, The Threepenny Opera, pp. 38-9, Grove Press, New York, 1949.
3. June 28, 1973.
4. Pittenger, Norman, "The Attributes of God in The Light of Process-Thought," "The Expository Times," p. 23, Vol. LXXXI, No. 1, October, 1969, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh.
5. Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr I., The Nobel Lecture on Literature, pp. 27-8, Harper & Row, New York 1972.

A subscription to the annual sermon series,
SERMONS FROM RIVERSIDE, approximately 40 in
number, may be made by sending a check for
\$6.50 payable to The Riverside Church, to:

The Publications Office
The Riverside Church
490 Riverside Drive
New York, N. Y. 10027