

“EXCUSE ME”

Scripture lesson: Matthew 25:14-30

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I have a confession to make. Last month I got a speeding ticket. It’s only the second one I have ever gotten. It happened when I was on my way back from visiting a patient at the Shelby Memorial Hospital. I was on a four-lane highway, thinking about what I needed to do next, when I saw the blue lights in my rear view mirror. I pulled over. The officer walked up to my car, I rolled down the window, asked what the problem was. He was very courteous and matter of fact, “You were speeding.”

I told him I was sorry, I thought I was going the right speed. “There was a school zone back there, the speed limit was 35,” he stated. I told him I had not seen the sign, hoping for mercy. I told him I had been to see someone at the hospital, but even as I said it I knew I was just making excuses. I had exceeded the speed limit. I deserved the ticket but still was trying to excuse myself. I am sure the officer had heard every excuse in the book. He wrote me the ticket, told me to slow down and have a good day. My excuse didn’t work.

The Police Officers Association in Indiana once sponsored a Best Speeding Alibi contest. One Honorable Mention went to an exasperated father who was stopped with a load of squalling children in the back seat. He told the officer, “I was trying to get away from the noise behind me.”

Whether we are good at it or not, we all find ourselves making excuses from time to time. We can be caught dead to rights and still we look for an alibi.

I used to love to read the comic strip Cathy. If you remember, Cathy embodied all the angst and anxieties of single working women. In one episode, Cathy broke up with Alex her steady who worked in a gym. She is having second thoughts about the break up. One day, she walks into the gym and there is Alex. “You look great, Cathy,” he said.

“Thanks, Alex,” she replies but then goes on to add, “I could have looked much better but I had to go on a business trip last month which threw me off schedule. I’d been doing so well.... I was on a great program. If only I had been able to stay on four more weeks, I could have looked incredible right now.”

Alex replies, “Uh, gee.... I’m sorry.”

The last frame shows Cathy with a chagrined look on her face as she says to herself, “Why settle for a compliment when you can go for condolences.”

Sometimes we can’t seem to help ourselves. Even a compliment can turn into an excuse. Making excuses almost seems to be a reflex action like covering our heads when something falls on us. Are excuses inevitable or is what we think is inevitable just another kind of excuse? There is a kind of tyranny to the inevitable. The idea is that there is nothing we can do, what will be will be, it’s inevitable, so I might as well accept it. Life seems filled with inevitabilities.

A woman is caught in adultery; it is inevitable that she be stoned. A young girl dies, it’s inevitable. A man is born blind, it is inevitable that he is a sinner and deserves his fate. That is, it was inevitable until Jesus comes along offering forgiveness, healing and power to break the bonds of the old inevitabilities.

Wilfred Harrington, in a study of the parables of Jesus, says that what we have in these stories is an invitation to possibilities beyond the old inevitabilities. The gospel is not about the inevitable, it is about the possible. In fact, the only thing inevitable in the gospels is the love and grace of God.

So, back to my speeding ticket. How is it possible to live without excuses? One day Jesus told a parable about a man who was going on a journey. The master calls together his servants and gives to each of them a sum of money – to one he gives five talents, to another two, and to the last one talent. A talent was a sum of money – a measure used to weigh silver, equivalent to about 60 pounds. One talent was equal to a laborer’s earnings for 20 years. So we are talking big money here. These servants have been given an awesome responsibility. The master does not tell them what to do with the money. He just leaves it to them.

You know what happened. The one with five talents traded them and earned five more, a 100% return. The servant with two talents did the same, he earned two more. A 100% return. But the third servant, who had been given one talent, hid it in the ground.

Not a bad idea if you have been following the stock market this week. Anything with the prospects of bringing 100% return is a risky investment. When someone tells you they can give you that kind of return, you know you had better beware. We know something about that in this county! Everyone is happy when the returns are good, but what if you lose everything?

“Better safe than sorry,” thought this last servant. Bury it, save it for a rainy day, don’t take unnecessary risks. Those who first heard this parable would most likely have identified with this third, conservative servant and condemned the other two for acting recklessly. So imagine their surprise when the parable ends. The master returns and calls for an accounting. To the first two servants who had risked everything, the master says, “Well done, you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many.”

But to the third servant, the one who had buried it and kept it all safe, the master says, “You wicked and lazy servant. Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has ten talents.” It seems so blatantly unfair. The master got all his money back. This third servant had been prudent. So what’s the beef?

The question here is what do we do with what we have been given? What do we do with the life that has been given to us? One answer, of course, is to hold onto to it, protect and hide it. The other answer is to risk, use, invest, spread. Sit on it or use it! There is no question about which Jesus chose, what God has given is meant to be used, invested, increased. Faith it not something that we stash away. Life is not to be found in hiding out. “You wicked and lazy servant,” the master says.

Scott Peck in his book, *The Road Less Traveled*, says that the original sin is laziness. We are made in the image of God. To reflect God’s image is the possibility for all of us...but to do that we have to be attentive to God’s spirit working within. And this takes listening...and listening means work. So the tendency is to resist growth, resist grace. To settle for what we already are. Within all of us is this force of atrophy which pushes us down, holds us back from becoming all that God intends for us to be.

In the third grade, I broke my arm and had it in a cast for some weeks. When the cast came off, my arm was all shriveled up, the muscles were weak. Muscles have to be exercised and used or they waste away and become useless. There is the principle of atrophy at work in the physical world which says that you use it or lose it.

It's an important question, what do we do with what is given to us? Use it or lose it, Jesus seems to be saying. "What you have will be taken from you," the master says. The third servant had played it safe and ended up with nothing. We can make excuses or we can make a life.

So what was this third servant's excuse? He has one. In fact, even before his master says anything, the excuse is on his lips, "I was afraid so I went and hid your talent in the ground." As far as excuses go, fear probably tops the list. It does for me.

Sometimes it is the fear of being inadequate. Whenever I watch a pro golf event on TV, like the US Open or the Masters, I feel that way. I see someone drive the ball 300 or more yards down a fairway makes me want to throw my clubs in the nearest lake. I just can't hit the ball like that. I can get to feeling inadequate on a golf course in a hurry.

That's the problem. The comparison game is one of the deadliest games we can play. When we start comparing ourselves to others, it doesn't take long before we can find someone who is better than we are at most anything. It makes us want to crawl into a hole and give up.

But that's not what is going on in this parable. Each received talents according to their ability. Paul says that, "Each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift." We are not accountable for someone else's talent, only our own. God is never going to ask me, "Why can't you hit a golf ball like Tiger Woods?" What is asked is what have you done with the grace that you were given? What did you do with the potential I gave you? We don't need to compare ourselves to others, but instead, risk daring ourselves for God. Compare or dare are the two options!

Related to the fear of inadequacy is the fear of imperfection. "There is no way I can do it right, be the best, so I might as well not try, give up." Of course, this is the perfect alibi because if we wait around until we are perfect then we will never do anything, try anything, be anything!

Michelangelo's statue of David in Florence is considered by many people to be the single greatest work of art in history. If you have ever seen it, you know it is stunning, standing nearly 20 feet tall. But there is an interesting story about the statue.

The David was carved from a single block of marble which had first been offered to another artist by the name of Donatello. Donatello inspected the marble carefully, saw that it was flawed and cracked and so he refused it. It was not good enough for his talent.

The stone sat in a warehouse for months when Michelangelo began looking for a marble to sculpt David. He heard about this stone. He went to inspect it for himself. He too saw the flaws and imperfections but he did not see them as an excuse but as a challenge. He took this imperfect piece of marble and worked with the flaws until he created something wonderful.

If God waited for perfect people to accomplish his purposes, then he would wait forever. We are all flawed creatures. Paul says we hold this treasure in an earthen vessel. But instead of that being an excuse, it is a challenge. The wonder of the gospel is what God can do with flawed creatures, if we stop making excuses and let him.

What is really lurking behind all of these fears is the fear of failure. What we are really afraid of is that we won't make it; we can't do it. It's better to play it safe than to fall on our face. And so we take our stand with the third servant in the parable.

But according to the parable, it is not failure we have to fear, it is not trying. "You should have at least invested the money with the bankers," the master said. "That would have been a safe investment with at least some return." But instead, this servant did nothing. He didn't even try.

Maybe we need to redefine failure. Someone has said that “if you are not failing now and again, it’s a sign that you are playing it safe.” The only failure is the failure to try!

God has a way of working with failures. It’s called grace, forgiveness. We don’t need to make excuses with God because we have grace. But what God can’t work with is unwillingness, apathy. What prevents God’s potential from being realized in our lives is laziness, the unwillingness to grow, to stretch, to invest ourselves.

My friend Rick Owen tells of growing up in Town Creek in Lawrence County. There were a lot of characters in that small town but one of the most interesting was the one-man police force. Everyone called him High Pockets because the dark blue pockets on his light blue uniform were pushed skyward by this great girth.

High Pockets worked evenings, weekends, and holidays and was on call every day at the local cotton gin. What was most interesting about him was his modern police equipment. To apprehend speeders, he would take a Kleenex and place it on the end of a coat hanger. He would then roll up the car window until the coat hanger with the Kleenex exposed would just be into the intersection of the highway. If an out-of-state or out-of-county tagged car were to drive by with sufficient speed to pull the Kleenex of the coat hanger, High Pockets would pull them over and write them a ticket for speeding as detected by radar.

Rick says that High Pockets taught him an important lesson, “You use what you have, to do what you have to do. That’s what God asks. God invites us to use what we have to do what needs to be done. If we do that, we don’t need to make excuses...we have possibilities.