

Bethlehem Lutheran Church
A Reconciling Works Congregation of the ELCA welcoming the LGBTQ community
- A multicultural, all-inclusive ecumenical ministry

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The Rev. Dr. David O. Guss, Fr., Ph.D.

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“Excuses! Excuses!”

Excuses, excuses! We all make them. Here is a list of excuses that public schools have received from parents of students through the years: 1) “My son is under a doctor’s care and should not take P.E. today. Please excuse him.” 2) “Please excuse my son’s tardiness. I forgot to wake him up and did not find him until I started making the beds.” 3) “Please excuse Jennifer for missing school yesterday. We forgot to get the Sunday paper off the porch, and by the time we found, it was Monday, and we thought it was Sunday.” Excuses, Excuses! There is a wise saying: “He who really wants to do something finds a way; he who doesn’t want to do something, finds an excuse to say no way!” We all know excuse makers - people who could accomplish much in the world if they were as creative at their tasks as they are at making excuses for not tackling their tasks in the 1st place.

Legendary baseball manager Casey Stengel said he could never stand to have what he called, a “pebble-picker” in his final lineup. A pebble-picker is the short-stop who, when he misses a grounder, looks around on the infield and always finds a pebble and holds it up for everyone to see from the stands as an excuse for his error. Obviously, there are some people who have an extraordinary talent in making excuses to avoid taking any meaningful action. That is the lesson of the parable found in our Gospel today, known as the parable of the talents, but in the New International Version this parable is known as the parable of the bags of gold. A wealthy man was going on a journey. Before he left he gave one of his servants 5 bags of gold. This servant used his 5 bags and made 5 bags more. His master was exceedingly pleased with him. The master gave another servant 2 bags of gold ...and, he also invested his gold wisely. He earned 2 more bags. But, a 3rd servant was given just 1 bag of gold. This servant was fearful and hid his bag of gold in the ground instead of investing it as his master had hoped. So, he had only the original bag of gold to show for his stewardship when the master returned.

Listen to his reasoning - or excuse-making, if we might call it that (Let’s read verses 24-27 together): “ 24 Then, the one who had received the 1 talent also came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; 25 so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ 26 But, his master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? 27 Then, you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. Obviously the master was unhappy. Now, what is Jesus really trying to say to us in this parable? What practical wisdom do you think we can obtain from today’s lesson?

We need to begin here: We are responsible for how we live our lives. You and I are responsible for the choices we make. That’s not a popular viewpoint nowadays. We are a generation of excuse makers. Now, it is true. Life can sometimes be unkind to us or we may be incredibly lucky. But, still, ultimately, we are responsible for how we respond to life’s ups and downs. A man named Daniel Schantz wrote to Guidepost magazine once to tell about an interesting experience he had. It was while he was taking flying lessons. One day, his flight instructor jotted the letters P-I-C in Schantz’s logbook. “What’s P-I-C?” Schantz asked. “P-I-C stands for Pilot in Command,” his instructor said. “It means that you are totally responsible for what happens when you are piloting this aircraft.”

Schantz flinched. “But, what if poor maintenance causes the engine to fail?” His instructor said. “It’s your fault. You should check everything before takeoff.” Schantz retorted, “What if a passenger hijacks me to Mexico?” “You’re still responsible for the aircraft and passengers,” his instructor said. Schantz protested, “What if the weather turns bad and I have to land on a highway?” “You will have to answer for it,” his instructor said. “No matter what happens, you will shoulder the blame because you are the Pilot in Command.” Schantz thought about his instructor’s words, and his words made him realize that he was responsible for his behavior, no matter what the circumstances. “When I’m late for a meeting,” says Schantz, “I dare not blame my watch. When I lose my temper in class, it’s not my students’ fault. When the bill collector calls, I must answer.” Schantz has quickly come to realize, “I’m the Pilot in Command.” The spiritual lesson here for you and me is this - we are all ultimately responsible for how we deal with our lives. Our parents are not responsible for the choices we make. Our spouse is not responsible for the choices we make. And, the universe is not responsible for the choices we make.

It’s like a little girl who was once in a very bad mood. She took her frustration out on her younger brother. At first she just teased him. Eventually she punched him. Then, she pulled his hair and kicked him in the shins. The boy could take it all – and, even dish back a few blows - until the kicking began. That hurt! And, he went crying to his mother, complaining about what his sister had done. The

mother came to the little girl and said, “Mary, why did you let Satan put it into your heart to pull your brother’s hair and kick his shins?” The little girl thought it over for a moment and then answered, “Well, Mom, maybe Satan did put it into my heart to pull Tommy’s hair ...but, kicking his shins was my own idea.” Now, Mary shouldn’t have kicked her brother in the shins, most of us will agree. But, I appreciate the fact that she was willing to take responsibility for her actions. She didn’t hide behind the old “the devil made me do it” excuse. That, at least, is refreshing. We are responsible for how we live our lives.

But, there is a 2nd thing we need to see. Circumstances rarely determine our destiny. Our character determines our destiny. Once again, yes, it is true. Some people have a much more difficult time in life than others. And, we can particularly sympathize with those who have physical and mental disabilities. We as a society ought to do far more than we are presently do to help these individuals. They should not be made to suffer because of conditions over which they have no control. On the other hand, it is evident that there are people who, because of their character, they have been able to overcome dire circumstances and they become blessed and soon able to become a blessing to the world. We should be aware of these kind of people in the world and give thanks for them. They inspire us. And, some of those people include many of you sitting in this very BLC congregation this morning.

You may be one of those individuals whose life has not always been easy. You may have come from a broken family. You may have had to stay at home to take care of your parents or a loved one instead of having the opportunity to go to college to make a better living. You may have been brought up in a family where you had to work for everything you got in life and did not have the advantages afforded to you like so many others. You may have been diagnosed or may still be diagnosed with a disease or a set of circumstances that has left you almost hopeless with no place to turn – but somehow “you made it” or “are still making it.” All we can say for sure is, for those of you who have “made it” or are still “trying to make it,” somehow you have left the Spirit of God in your life and that has allowed and is allowing the character of Jesus to be an active and driving force within you. You are among the individuals who have accepted God’s call to not only live responsible lives, but to become a blessing to the world regardless of what you have had to overcome to get there. You have come to the point in your life where you recognize the importance of giving thanks to God for your blessings And, guess what, God’s eyes are on you. He sees your attitude of gratitude. And, because of the character of Jesus that you have allowed to become part of who you are, God has given you the power to turn your lemons into lemonade. I’m serious about that!

You see, sisters and brother, this is God’s call to you and me in this parable which we have just read today. This lesson teaches us to not only take responsibility for our lives, but when we become a responsible Christian by taking on the character of Jesus within, God helps us to turn the corner. The God of the Jesus who now resides within our hearts no longer allows us to play victim, but encourages us to invest our lives in living for him, and by living for him and one another, we become blessed ourselves. It’s a strange type of math or equation, if you will, but that’s the way God works. Count your blessing, be a blessing to others, and God blesses you back! Guaranteed!

Today, Jesus tells a parable about a man who was given a gift – he does not recognize it or see it as a gift – that’s why he buries in the ground. But, God’s message to us is this, pay a attention to the gifts God has given to you, and not only recognize those gifts, but give thanks for those gifts, in spite of whatever circumstance you have had to face or are facing in life right this very minute. So, I ask you, have you discovered the gifts God has given you? Some folks go through life and never pay attention to God’s gifts to them. Or, if they have, they often feel God has not given them enough gifts and have left them helpless. So, God is telling us today, stop acting as though God has given you nothing. Stop shifting the responsibility of why you think you have nothing in life on something or on someone else. At the end of the day, you are responsible for you. Not your wife, not your husband, not your brother, not your sister – you are responsible for you! And, know this, no matter how poor you think you are – God has given you gifts. Take inventory of those gifts. Don’t hide them, Don’t horde them for yourself. Don’t abuse them. Take on the character of Jesus. Pay attention to the Jesus within you. When you do that, you’re about to discover a new world. You’re about to discover a new you. You will invest your gifts in a life that causes you to live for God and one another. Begin “fully” investing your life in Jesus today! No longer will you be a “pebble-picker,” but you be about becoming a “blessing maker.” Pay attention how your “attitude” will change to “gratitude.” What will happen when you take on this character of Jesus? I’ll tell you what will happen. You will change your life. You will change the world. You will live to his glory, not your glory or someone else’s glory. , God will bless you and you will be blessed today, now, and forever more. Amen.

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