

Sermon for Sunday, October 31, 1971 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"A VERY SINCERE PUMPKIN PATCH"

Text: "I tell you, that to every one who has will more be given; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away." St. Luke 19:26

Some of the most perceptive theological commentary on life today is made in a comic strip. The Cartoonist, Charles Schultz, is the creator of the comic strip "Peanuts" and his characters, Charlie Brown, Lucy, Linus, Snoopy and all the gang are well-known among all age groups. Around Halloween time, Linus--who has rejected Santa Claus in favor of the Great Pumpkin--begins to get his pumpkin patch in order. He is convinced that the Great Pumpkin will come and visit the most sincere pumpkin patch and bring with him all sorts of toys and other goodies. In spite of repeated failures of the Great Pumpkin to appear and in spite of the embarrassment he undergoes when the Great Pumpkin does not put in an appearance, Linus persists in his conviction. As he once commented, it doesn't matter what you believe as long as you are sincere. Although his faith in the Great Pumpkin never pays any dividends, poor Linus refuses to surrender his conviction. He is willing to pay whatever price his faith demands of him even the ridicule of his heartless friends is heaped upon him. Once more Halloween is coming and Linus is already out in his pumpkin patch. If he has the most sincere pumpkin patch the Great Pumpkin will surely come to visit him.

There is one overwhelming quality about Linus that we have to admire. That quality is his unequivocal commitment to what he believes. In spite of the consequences he will not give an inch. He refuses to budge from his conviction and in spite of all he endures he is still unequivocally committed. Which leads me to contrast Linus and one of the men in the parable that we read this morning. You will remember that a master was going away and he left some money with each of three servants. The first two traded with what was entrusted to them. But the third man simply put away what had been entrusted to him and when his master returned he demanded an accounting. "Here is your pound," he said to his master, I kept it put away in my handkerchief. I was afraid of you, because you are a hard man; you draw out what you never put in and reap what you did not sow." There is something pathetic and sad about this man. One feels almost as though he is mistreated in the end. After all, did he not faithfully go around with his pound carefully wrapped in his handkerchief? However, there are two observations I want to make about this man that will help us to understand why, in spite of his faithful keeping of his pound, he is condemned.

The first observation is this: He looked at his master critically. Listen to his words, "you want to reap where you did not sow. You are a hard man who draws out what he never put in." The parallel in life is obvious. God gives me my faith--little as it often is--and expects me, like the servant with the pound, to produce for his kingdom. Yet, when I look at life, it is very hard for me to believe Someone up there really cares about me or is looking out for me. How can you explain a moral dilemma like Vietnam? How can you understand a dead mother and child when some drunken driver has wiped out their lives? Or how can you understand the whole history of man's incredible inhumanity to man--of war, devastation, and death? And look at the church! Is there much here to strengthen a man's faith? So how can God expect to reap a harvest of faithfulness when he has sown only a little smidgen, a tiny dab, of faith in my life? He hasn't given me much reason to have faith. Linus, by contrast, has never condemned his Great Pumpkin even though he has never shown up. Uncritically he awaits next year when he knows his faith will be justified.

Having said all of that, however, let me make a second observation about this man who returned his master's money unused. That observation is this: in spite of his attitude, his little reason to produce for his master, he keeps what he has received. He hordes it. He doesn't throw it away, he doesn't spend it, but he keeps it, he hordes it. Now notice this: In the very keeping of the money he recognizes the existence and the rights of his Lord. Here again the parallel to life is obvious. We don't do anything with our little smidgen of faith, we don't produce an abundant harvest of faithfulness, but we don't throw it away either. We don't add to what we have received, but we don't throw it away either. We keep it. We preserve it. We wrap it up in an occasional church attendance, a small yearly gift to the church--indeed, we wrap our faith up in some insignificant spiritual handkerchief and do nothing with it.

So, having looked critically at his master and found him wanting, yet still keeping the pound and thereby recognizing the rights of his Lord, the servant is condemned. The Master says, "I will judge you by your own words." That is, the master says, "I am going to meet you on your own level. You said you were afraid of me--you said you took me seriously." And, after all, don't we always take seriously those things we are afraid of? "But," says the master, "If you took me seriously, if I am the sort of person you say I am, you would have fought against me. Some of your fellow citizens hated me and sent a delegation on my heels asking that I not be made king over them. You didn't do that. You didn't fight against me and if I'm the sort of person you say--a hard man, drawing out where I never put in, reaping where I never sowed--then if you took me seriously you would have opposed me, fought me. If you felt about me the way you did and took me seriously you would have thrown your pound away, you would have cast it from you, you would have cried out, 'I want nothing to do with this man who draws and reaps where he has no right. I will have nothing to do with this master who gives so little and expects so much!' But you didn't do that. You sat on the fence. You wouldn't trade with what I gave you, but you wouldn't throw it away either. You played both ends against the middle and were dishonest to both and because you did that, you didn't take me seriously at all."

One thing about Linus and his pumpkin patch, he takes it seriously. Right or wrong, he isn't sitting on the fence. He is totally committed to his conviction and he has given Santa Claus the heave-ho in favor of the Great Pumpkin. He isn't playing both ends against the middle.

Does that make sense to you? There are only two ways to take a thing seriously. Either you renounce and deny it and cast it from you or else you risk everything you have and are for it. If you take a thing seriously you must have a sincere pumpkin patch. Either you throw your pound away in disgust and anger, or you trade with it. There is no third choice of wrapping it in your handkerchief and keeping it.

Beginning today every family in this congregation will be given a chance to demonstrate how sincere its pumpkin patch is. Every family will be asked to make a financial commitment to Christ and his church and in making that pledge each of us will demonstrate the depth of our love and commitment. And as we are thinking about how much we will give to God's work through the church, let me suggest that either we should throw our faith and our Christianity on the trash-heap or else commit the whole of our lives to Jesus without reservation. If God gives us no reason for faithful service, if we feel him to be uncaring and unjust then let us chuck the whole thing. Let us shake our fists at God and have done with him. That, or give

him our lives wholly and completely and without reservation. There is really no third choice. We can only curse God or fall on our knees before him. We can't wrap our faith in some spiritual handkerchief and return it, for God won't have it. "I tell you--the man who has will always be given more, but the man who has not will forfeit even what he has."

Let me close with this last thought. In the parable the master took the words of the servant himself and put them to the test. The servant stood or fell on that basis. Will you try that with God? Meet God at his own level, take his own words and put them to the test and let God stand or fall on that basis. God says, "Cast your cares on me and I will care for you." Put God to the test. Say to him, "I'll see whether you will see me through tomorrow and next week. I'll really find out if you will see me through the valley of the shadow of death and be my rod and staff to comfort me. And when I've lost the way and its dark and cold in the chambers of my heart; when I'm filled with fear and anxiety and tension, when I'm unhappy and disillusioned, I'll put my hand in yours and see if you care for me. Yes, God, I'll put you to the test, I'll take your own words and let you stand or fall on them."

Linus takes the Great Pumpkin seriously and he always has the most sincere pumpkin patch in town. And even though he is wrong, he is not guilty of sitting on the fence. He is totally committed. Taking God seriously means to either reject him and curse him and shake your fist at him or it means to commit your life to him, wholly, completely, utterly--without any reservation--and there is no third choice. When you are asked to fill out your financial commitment to Jesus and his church, put him to the test, meet him on his own level, let him stand or fall on his own words. Jesus said, "The man who has will always be given more..." Jesus said, "Him who comes to me I will in no wise cast out." That's his word and he died for it. He deserves to be given a real chance in your life. Will you try him at his word? Linus' pumpkin patch represents the depth of his commitment. How sincere is your pumpkin patch?