

Talent Show
Sermon on Matthew 25:14-30 Preached at Highland Park UMC
Sunday, November 13, 2005

Mention the term “wordsmith,” and chances are that William Shakespeare comes to mind, and with good reason: By some estimates¹ the Bard added about 3000 words to the English language. We can credit the Bible with having introduced at least one word into English, and that is the word ‘talent,’ which comes from the parable Jesus told. Talent in this parable translates the Greek word *talanton*, referring to a huge sum of money, indeed the largest monetary unit known to the ancient Near East. It is because this story, with its theme of gifts given according to ability, is so widely known that “‘talent’ came into the English language in the Middle Ages as a term for God-given abilities.”²

And that presents a problem. Mention the title, “The Parable of the Talents” and chances are that everyone knows not only the plot but also the moral of the story. The plot is simple: A man getting ready to go on a long journey calls in his slaves and entrusts to them his property: to one slave he gives five talents, to another two, and to another one. While the man is away, two of the slaves go out and put the money to work. The third slave puts the money in a hole in the ground. When the master returns, the first two slaves bring back their start-up capital along with a 100% return on their investments. The master praises them as “good and trustworthy” slaves, gives them even more responsibility, and invites them to enter into his joy. The third slave, however, confesses that he was afraid of the master, and so he hid the talent by burying it. He returns to his master the one talent, only to be called “wicked and lazy” and to have his one talent taken away before getting thrown into “the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Mt. 25:30).

¹ Charlton Ogburn in “Shakespeare’s Self-Portrait” cites the Oxford English Dictionary as having made this estimate. See <http://www.everreader.com/ogburn7.htm>.

² M. Eugene Boring, *Matthew*, New Interpreters Bible Commentary vol. 8 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995) 453.

Like a lot of preachers and their treatments of it, I could tell you that this parable tells us that some people have lots of talents, and some people have a few, but everybody has at least one talent. I could tell you that this passage is “an encouragement to discover what gifts and talents we all have and to use them for God.”³ Those aren’t bad points to make, they are biblically accurate, and they sound good. Having made those points, I could stop now and we could all go home, something for which many of you are fervently praying right now. I could do all those things, but I’m not going to.

I’m not going to tell you that the point of this parable is “everybody has a talent so go out and use yours” because that’s way too tame. That’s the kind of thing anybody can think up and slap on a motivational poster featuring some adorable kitty cat and put around the office to increase productivity. Nonsense. Jesus has something more profound to say than that.

First of all, it is important to keep in mind that this story is but one in a series of stories Jesus relates in order to tell us something about the coming kingdom of heaven, the promised reign of God. As we heard last week, Jesus calls us to be ready, to be prepared, because we do not know when that kingdom and its accompanying judgment will come. Like the parable of the bridesmaids, the parable of the talents features someone’s return and the consequences of that return for those who should have been prepared for it. If the story of the bridesmaids warned us that we need to be ready, this story suggests how we are to be ready.

We are to be ready for Jesus’ return by engaging in what scholars call “responsible activity.”⁴ This is what the first two slaves did: having been entrusted by their master with large sums of money, both set out immediately to work with the resources they had been given.

³ Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997) 281.

⁴ R. T. France, *Matthew*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press and Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1985) 352. Also Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., *The Gospel of Matthew*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1991) 353.

Maybe they bought mutual funds or stock options or cattle futures or real estate. Whatever they did, they doubled their money. And this is the point of having a talent, isn't it—to invest our gifts and skills and treasures in a way that produces results? Instead of waiting around for someone to tell them what to do or where to start, these savvy servants take initiative and risk, stepping out in faith, believing that making his gift to them grow is what would please their master.

But here we have to understand that Jesus is not simply endorsing big-dollar wheeling and dealing or high-stakes investment strategies. Jesus is talking about what we do with the gospel. This is a story about two radically different responses to God and his grace in our lives.⁵

Three men were given talents, “each according to his ability” (25:15). In the economy of God, God deals with each of us as individuals and gives us gifts according to the knowledge, skills, and talent with which we are endowed. Some people have more gifts than others. Alan Greenspan, for instance, is not only the highly regarded chairman of the Federal Reserve Bank, but he is also an accomplished clarinetist. Two of those three men accepted the gifts they were given without question or complaint, for the gifts were after all, not theirs to begin with, but the property of their master. The one who received two talents didn't whine that he didn't get five. Both men went out and worked to increase their gifts, making them bear fruit and multiply.

When they settled their accounts, their master was thrilled, and offered them high praise: “Well done, good and trustworthy slaves,” he said. “You have been trustworthy in a few things; I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master” (25:21, 23). In our age of merit pay and year-end bonuses, we tend to miss what's happening here. The men enjoyed the confidence of their master who entrusted them both with vast sums of money for an extended period of time. And when the men come back with double the initial investment, the master offers them lavish praise. The master did not owe them this. As Jesus asked in another setting,

⁵ I am indebted to Tom Long for the insightful analysis in his commentary, cited above.

“Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded?” (Lk. 17:9). But of course, the men had been given no instructions, they hadn’t been told what to do. They only knew their master’s character and acted accordingly. The men saw their master as an extraordinary man: trusting, welcoming, generous, and benevolent, and that is why they felt free to risk and to act.

But that isn’t how the third slave saw his master. “Master,” said the third man, “I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours” (25:24-25). It is a characterization of the master as “a harsh and unjust man who inspires only fear and caution.”⁶ We see this man cowering before his master, afraid to lift up his eyes, unwilling to risk, and so again we miss what is happening. The man did not only what was lawful, but what was prudent. Burying the money was a practice regarded by rabbinical law as the best security against theft. The slave acted cautiously to protect his master’s property.

But this slave acted out of a caution born of fear. Unlike his colleagues, he could not see the trust his master placed in him, nor the master’s generosity and benevolence. He saw his master not merely as “formidable and exacting,” but as evil, rapacious, and unjust. The master is so awful that “there is no room for freedom or responsible action, only paralysis.”⁷ The slave would not even venture the money in the relative safety of a low-interest savings account. Instead, with fear and trembling, he hands back to his master his one talent.

How we see God will largely determine how we respond to God: If we see God as a Being who, in the words of St. James, “gives to all generously and ungrudgingly” (1:5), then we are free to give our gifts, to take risks and to act in faith. If we stand and confidently sing, “Praise God from whom all blessings flow,” then we can live as a people who know that

⁶ Boring, *ibid.*

⁷ Long, 283.

everything that comes to us comes from above, that all is gift, shared freely with us by a God confident in our abilities. We are bold to go forth into the world to dare and to risk and to live for God. On the other hand, if we see God only as oppressive, cruel, demanding, and exacting, then our lives of faith will be small and mean. Our discipleship will consist in “playing [it] safe, and so achieving nothing.”⁸ At the end of the day, we will hand back our talent, and say, “Here you go. At least I didn’t lose it.”

You and I are called to something more. We are called to love greatly and risk freely and live richly because we serve a God who is generous and loving and kind and good. We serve a God who gives lavish gifts, expecting us to take them and make them fruitful and multiply. Let your talent show.

⁸ France, p. 354, quoting E. Schweizer, *The Good News According to Matthew* (London: SPCK, 1976) 473.