

Talent Show
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
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Matthew 25:14-30
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Today's is a story that happens rather frequently. As a matter of fact, if you live in the Carolinas, there's a good chance you are the beneficiary of well-invested talents.

Long ago, when ole' Buc Duke was making his millions as the world's wealthiest tobacco magnate, he started sharing some of his good fortune. He gave substantial sums to Davidson College, as well as Duke, Furman, and Johnson C. Smith Universities. The grateful institutions invested those funds into all kinds of programs. And impressed by the results, the Duke family, and later the Duke Endowment, have given hundreds of millions of dollars over the past century to help support the work of these schools, work that has affected each of us in numerous ways.

Over in Winston-Salem, the Reynolds family got in on the act, too. Wake Forest University, the Bowman Gray School of Medicine, NC Baptist Hospital, and others were the beneficiaries of tobacco talents. Even the old Reynolds Coliseum at N.C. State was funded with tobacco money. And as these institutions also did good with their entrusted talents, they were rewarded with more.

"What about UNC?" the Carolina fans ask. Well don't quote me, but I'm pretty sure tobacco talents are only given to schools whose basketball players attend class. Ha! I kid. (Sort of.)

Joking and basketball aside, gifts are given and endowments are established in the hopes that such funds will sew additional wealth, whatever form that may be. And donors become more generous when they see a return on their investment.

Now imagine for a moment, a university, regardless of their basketball team's devotion to academics, was awarded a gift of \$10 million. The donor said, "Here ya go. I trust you. I've got other affairs to settle – the Mrs. and I are gonna finally take that cruise around the world we've been planning. I'll see you in a year or two."

And imagine the chancellor of the university took the check, put it in a shoebox under his office couch, and went on about his business. When the donor returned to check on his gift's progress, the chancellor said, "Ah, you know, it's just you are really a difficult donor, and you are pretty picky, and even when you give us money, you are never really satisfied with how we spend it. And we've got plenty of names on our buildings. So we just figured you'd be glad to know it's all still right here."

It's fair to say the donor would demand his money back. Imagine all the good just the interest on that gift alone could have done: scholarships, endowed professorships, research and innovation, the buy-out of that losing coach's contract, the funding of a committee to finally rid the corruption of college athletics. Instead, nothing. Nada. All because the chancellor feared the donor would not be satisfied with the school's effort.

And there would be no doubt that the university down the street would be the new beneficiary of the donor's generosity.

In today's parable, the first two servants are entrusted with substantial gifts. And each one of them acts as a steward. Their sums must be managed, not simply ignored. But the third servant, that servant lives in fear, afraid to be entrusted with such weighty responsibility. He believes his master to be short on patience and short on grace, and so he is paralyzed to act. Instead, he buries the money, avoiding its potential for profit and for loss. The bold stewards are rewarded. The fearful servant is not. Matter of fact, he's cast out into the back alley, and the little he does have is given to the two others.

Such is the case in God's kingdom. Those who use their gifts wisely will be rewarded, in fact they'll even get more. But woe to the risk-averse, they'll lose it all.

Well, here we go again. Last week, it was wise maidens and foolish maidens. The ones with extra lamp oil enjoy the banquet. The one's without keep knocking, but no answer. This week, the savvy investors get to go swimming in greenbacks, and the risk-averse servant loses all of his possessions. Next week, the shepherd will put his sheep on the right, that's the good side of the banquet, and his goats on the left, that's the wrong side of the banquet.

And once more this week, and mostly likely next week, too, I will reject the traditional allegory.

Call it lamp oil, call it talents, call it farm animals, but the substance of God is not a commodity. God's love, and particularly the presence of the Christ in our lives, is always accessible and it's never exhaustible.

Matthew wants us to have accountability for our actions, and Matthew wants us to be responsive to God's calling. Matthew knows that the presence of God is special, and Matthew wants us to recognize that Jesus' time on earth is fleeting, and the Son of Man's coming is inevitable.

Therefore, Matthew uses very forceful hyperbole to nudge us, or better yet, scare us into action. Last week, the store was about to close, so you'd better stock up. This week, it's more like *Brewster's Millions*. You've got gifts to spend, and a short amount of time spend them. Don't tarry.

Again, I realize it's all an analogy. And we live in a society that values wealth. But how about we stop using economic metaphors for the gifts God gives us. How about, instead of talents, we say love?

The master gave his servant a substantial amount of love – he gave him a huge part of himself – his time, his attention, his resources, his money, his dignity, his friendship. And the servant took that love and gave it to others. And it kept growing and growing and growing. And the master kept giving the servant more love.

The same was true for the second servant. And the master gave him more love, too.

These two were lucky. They lived in communities that made sure people knew the real story of the master, knew the depth of his love and grace.

But the third servant. He couldn't believe that the master's love was authentic. He'd been told about an abusive, punitive, quick-to-anger kind of master – a macho warrior with an axe to grind. Nobody ever told him about a master who had all the gentle wisdom of Sophia. Or the master who was a parent searching eagerly for his/her child; or an old woman determined to find her coin; or a shepherd seeking after his lost sheep. This servant never heard about a master full of grace, one who also loved and

hoped and laughed and grieved like he did. All the servant knew of was a master who didn't have his best interest at heart. And so the servant was too scared and too scarred to invest the love his master gave him. He couldn't even squander it. All he could do was bury it in a place to be forgotten, removed from any impact.

Friends, Matthew may be right. He may be spot on. Jesus might be coming this very moment. And when he comes the window of opportunity for our salvation might slam shut on us. But to be as honest and as forthright as I can be, that's not something any of us can control.

But here's what we can control. The people of Sardis have been lucky enough to be infused with and inspired by the love and grace of a good and pleasant God. And as we sit in this room, each of us is the beneficiary of God's talents. I dare say, God has given each of us as a gift to one another. And each week, we seek to invest in these gifts, that is, we seek to love one another, in the hopes that God's love will grow stronger and grow bigger. And as your pastor, I can tell you I see that, and I feel that, and I believe that every day.

Today's parable doesn't so much affirm or refute for me the importance of using the gifts God has given us. I'm confident we're using those gifts well.

Instead, the parable throws out a haunting question: "What story are we telling others, what gifts are we sharing with others, what talents are we using to ensure that the risk-averse servants: the broken, and the disenfranchised, and the doubting, and the grieving, and the skeptical, and the forgotten, and the not-so-lucky – what things are we doing to for these servants to make the abundant, welcoming grace and love of God apparent? What are we doing to help unbury the talents of those neighbors who have been overburdened and overwhelmed by overzealous and outdated threats of judgement?"

Sardis Baptist Church, we've got a closet full of lamp oil and a shed full of shovels. I suggest we busy ourselves by helping our neighbors light their torches and dig up their talents rather than worrying so much about the Parousia's arrival.

'Cause I've got a feeling that if we do, when the Son of Man comes, be it today, or tomorrow, or in ten thousand years, even if he is as harsh as Matthew likes to imagine, he's gonna have hard time finding many souls with buried treasures who need casting into the back alley.

Then again, I'm like the first two servants. I think he's coming with a grace and gentleness beyond measure.

In the meantime, while I've still got breath in my lungs, and joy in my heart, and the sweet, sweet spirit of this place to sustain me, I'm gonna keep investing my talents. I hope you'll do the same!

Amen.