

Don't Worry, Be Happy

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Matthew 25:14-30

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I said I didn't like last week's scripture about the 10 maidens, 5 who weren't prepared for the coming of the bridegroom and got locked out of the celebration. I don't particularly like today's parable, either. We are still in that part of Matthew's Gospel which centers upon being prepared for the coming of God and the consequences of not being prepared. I don't like the consequences.

First there is a command to watch for the signs of the coming Messiah, like one might watch the sprouting of a fig tree for the coming of summer.¹

Then there is a reminder of Noah, how the people ate, drank, and were merry until the flood swept them all away. This, too, comes with the command to watch the signs, though no one knows the day or hour.²

Then there is the story of the servant who, while his master is away, is held responsible for the household. If he is a good servant and maintains his property well, he will be blessed. But if, while the master is delayed, he misuses his property and mistreats the other servants, then he will be thrown where people weep and gnash their teeth.³

Then there is the parable of the ten maidens: the maidens who are waiting to enter the wedding celebration, the five who are low on oil (are not prepared and watching) are locked out.⁴

Then today's lesson, the parable of the talents, comes and the slave who hid his one talent is thrown into the outer darkness to weep and gnash his teeth.

When all these lessons are summarized they go something like this: Those who carefully watch, who see the signs, who pay attention to God's speaking, who are faithful servants, who are prepared, who use the gifts they have received, will be blessed. Those who don't watch the signs, are self-engrossed, who are cruel, unprepared and don't use their gifts will be cursed.

It is the cursed part I don't like. I don't like threats or punishment, especially divine punishment. It seems so final and fatal, so without compassion. When I first read today's parable I felt sorry for the one talent servant. One of his fellow servants got five talents, and another two. Of course, with the greater abundance, they can afford to take risks, to trade, to

¹ Matt. 24:32-35

² Matt. 24:36-44

³ Matt. 24:45-51

⁴ Matt. 25:1-13

use their talents and make money. But the poor one talent guy, if he loses his one talent then surely the master will be angry.

Meditating on the parable I was a bit miffed at God. What kind of cruel God is it that would punish the one talent guy? It was the master who gave this poor character only one talent. And why would Jesus tell a story meant to frighten us into obedience? I said before, I don't like threats.

Then I read the footnote to the word talent. It told how much a talent was worth. Perhaps I hadn't been paying attention, or maybe I just like to stick up for the poor underdog, or maybe I live too close to being worthy of the threat, but after reading the footnote I no longer felt so sorry for this one talent guy. I quote the note:

*This talent was more than fifteen years' wages of a laborer.*⁵

If you figure minimum wage for 15 years, the master has given the one talent guy around \$160,000. And if it is a skilled laborer we might triple the amount to almost \$500,000. That's a lot of talent. This is a generous master. When I began to realize how generous the master was, I realized how frightened the servant was. This one talent servant was gifted with half a life time of wages, and in fear of the master, in fear of failure, he hid 15 years in the ground. And because he hid the talent, because he didn't use it, trade it, risk it in the world, his master was angry and punished him. Ironically, his fear of failure made his fears come true. Because he fails to recognize the abundance given to him, he ends in the place where people "weep and gnash their teeth."

When my daughter Erika was a sophomore in college she went through times of questioning herself and a bit of fear. I know Vickie doesn't look old enough to have such a child, but she is.

Erika didn't know what she wanted to declare as her major. It was her struggle on how to use the talents God had given her. She loves and is talented at history, sports and children. But she couldn't see a future in any of these and so she worried about what she would do. She was fearful that if she pursued what she loves, there would be no future for her. So she was tempted to do nothing, quit school, and wait tables or something, to bury her talent.

I believe that Erika is not unique in this. Many of us fail to recognize the true value of the gifts given to us. We think we are poor, that we have been given little, when in fact we are wealthy beyond our true needs.

Thinking we are poor, we are afraid to use our gifts lest we lose them. So we dig a little hole in our soul and bury who we

⁵ Greek-English New Testament, second edition, Nestle-Aland, (Biblia-Druck GmbH, Stuttgart, 1985), 72

are outback, protecting our poor little gift for what? Death? Sadly, though we are trying to save ourselves, we condemn ourselves. For hiding our gifts, failing to share our gifts, leads us to live in fear of failure and death, and we end up sending ourselves to where people weep and gnash their teeth. By our own fear we deprive ourselves of the joy of life.

During her time of wrestling I talked to Erika on the phone and then wrote her a letter. It is a statement of my faith and my hope for her to be able to share in that faith. I have her permission to share the letter with you.

Dear Erika,

As I was writing the sermon on Tuesday, I was thinking about you, so this letter to you is also a part of a coming sermon. If that is not OK let me know. I cannot think of my faith apart from the people I love.

I want you and everyone like you, to know, your talents are not scarce, they are abundant. Like the one talent (a talent is 15 years of wages for a laborer) guy in the Parable of the Talents, God has given you more gifts than you can fully use. If you don't use your gifts, you will end up anxious, "weeping and gnashing your teeth". But in using your gifts life will unfold for you and you will be rich beyond your dreams, you will "enter the joy of your master".

You are exceptional in history. Your mind loves and retains huge stores of information. Your skills in analysis (remember the Roman ruins at Fort Chester) are genius. And should you decide to acquire a foreign language to pursue work in history, you will be successful, because you will do this in the same way you have met every other challenge in your life, with dedicated work (remember math), a near irritating tenacity (remember how you got a car), and a bright mind (remember our arguments that you have won).

And should you decide to pursue a career somewhere in sports, you will be successful here also because ever since you were a child you could handle anything that bounced twice as well as the rest of us. And you have proven yourself a leader. You inspire others to success.

And should you choose to work with children, you will continue to experience the love you so easily engender in your cousins Tyler, Cory and Riley. Remember how when we call on the phone it is not their aunt and uncle, but their cousin "Airka" they want. My guess is that the children at the child care center, where you work, are deeply in love with you and you with them.

And finally, should you end up doing a combination of the above or not any of the above, you will still be successful because you are abundantly gifted and dedicated to caring for and loving people. The love you give to friends and family is your greatest gift and your greatest asset.

I know it is corny to say, but, "Don't worry, be happy." Follow what you love to do and life will come your way. Chase someone else's dreams and you will always wish you were someone else.

Or as Jesus said, "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body, more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is

thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O people of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'...But seek you first the kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well. Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day."

Love, Dad⁶

Erika really loves it when I end a letter quoting Jesus.

To follow what we love; to use the gifts we have been given for God, to live without anxiety about tomorrow, is to trust God's gifts and abundance for each day. Each of us has been given talents. For some of us it is music, for some listening, for others the gifts of inspiring, for some it is law, or medicine, or building, or teaching, or auto mechanics. For some it is the gift of earning money.

Yes, it is true that some folks have more talents than others. There are great preachers like John Wesley, Fred Craddock and James Forbes, whose gifts I will never approximate. But everyone, everyone, has been given at least one talent and it is of great worth. We and the whole of the world become poorer when any one of us fearfully hides our talent in the ground. When Erika shares her talents, uses her wealth, the world is a far richer place and she is a blessed person.

I know there are those, who like Erika, wonder what talent God has given them and where it might be used. It is sometimes a struggle to know where our passions, our gifts and our personality coincide with what it is God has called us to do with our life.

I have a friend who once said to me, "I know God is calling me to something, but I can't seem to find the phone. And when I do, God seems to have hung up."

Well, at Bear Creek we want to help you find the phone, and understand the message. Jennifer Maxwell and Debbie Leyva will soon teach a class on knowing your talents and putting them to use. The class is called Spiritual Gifts and will start Wednesday, November 30. The class will not only help you identify what talent God has given you, but will assist you in looking for opportunities to use and risk your talent. You can sign up next week on your presence slip.

But whether you sign up or not, follow what you love, be with those who love you, use the talents given you to serve God, your neighbor and yourself, and the rest will take care of itself. I say to you, what I tell my daughter, do those things to which God calls you by passion, by gift, by personality and by opportunity, and you will enter the joy of your master which is the joy of your own life. Shalom and Amen.

⁶ Matt. 6:25-34