

Talent: revealing truth

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Lynn C. Sanders, Associate Rector,
at the nine o'clock service, November 13, 2011, The Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost.
Based on Matthew 25:14-30.*

I can remember learning this story of the talents as a child in Sunday School. Childhood, or at least mine in the time and place I grew up, was a time of freedom, of playing and figuring out what your talents were—what you were good at, what you really enjoyed doing. Funny how often those are the same thing.

A generation later, I watch with interest and delight as my nieces and nephew go about exploring their own interests and aptitudes. Their parents have encouraged each of their five children to try different things, to commit to a particular activity for a summer or a school year to see how they like it, to see if their liking and interest are great enough to support the determination and practice they'll need to develop that particular ability.

So I've happily attended their ballet and tap and piano recitals and swim meets. I've admired drawings and paintings and photography; watched baseball, soccer, football and basketball games; heard about golf and tennis. I've cheered both cheerleader and cross-country runners. I even received a horseback-riding lesson from a young niece.

My nephew showed an amazingly early attraction to sports—anything that involved a ball and running as fast as you could go. At age 5 David challenged me to a game he'd devised that involved our sprinting around the outside of the house. We set off, and being a good aunt, I gave him a good run, and it just so happened that he won by this much. I congratulated him. Eyes shining, he urged, "Let's race again, Aunt Lynn Marie!" It was a hot and humid day. Content to rest on my non-laurels, I tried to ease out of another round: "David, we've already raced, and you won." David didn't miss a beat. With the true instincts of a coach, he encouraged, "Well maybe you'll be faster this time!"

My niece Emily showed an amazing early ability with computers, particularly the combination of computers and art and photography. When Emily was 8, her dad came home one night and mentioned that he'd need to make a PowerPoint presentation for an important meeting coming up. Emily looked up from her computer and asked, "Dad, do you want me to help you with that?" He told me later, with a mixture of pride and embarrassment, "She did a really great job, better than I could have done."

For many years I understood this parable of the talents, as I'm guessing many of us have, to be about God's creating each of us with certain abilities, and the responsibility each of us has to develop what we've been given. It takes some working through, especially as a young person, to come to terms with the fact that some people really do have more than others. Why did that person get five, but this one only two, that one only one? How can Laura dance like that? Why can Mike play the piano so much better than the rest of us?

If we can work through the basic unfairness and envy, and especially if we are helped to appreciate our own abilities, we can come to value the many different gifts that people have been given and that they've worked hard to develop. The New York City Marathon was last Sunday. I've run a few races myself, the longest a half marathon. Just that bit of running makes me appreciate the natural ability, body build and hard work it takes to be as good as those winners are. No matter how hard I train, I'll never run like a Kenyan. But that's not the point. How amazing that God has created some people to run, and to love running.

When I watch and hear Bill and Paolo play this magnificent organ, I think, wow, that's just amazing. No matter how many lessons I took, I could not play like that. Somehow their fingers and their brains and their very souls combine to make truly heavenly music—and to be able to teach others to do that. Thanks be to God that they have that extraordinary ability and that they have worked hard—and continue to work hard—to develop it. I love sitting close to the choir and hearing their voices, thinking often, how do they make sounds like that? I marvel that anyone has the gift of perfect pitch. A note is played: how can they tell it's an A? I delight in finding people anywhere who have the gift of hospitality.

As adults we know not everyone is given the same abilities. Not everyone gets the same opportunities. So much depends on where and to whom we happen to be born. But we all have abilities. Our question needs to be: what have I done with what I was given?

This has been the popular interpretation of the parable of the talents in our time and our Western culture. In fact, our English word "talent" comes from this very parable. It's not a wrong interpretation, and it has much to recommend it. But in Jesus' and Matthew's time and place, "talent" meant something different, which leads us to a different interpretation of this parable—one I think we need to consider.

A talent in Jesus' and Matthew's time did not refer to ability but to a unit of weight, particularly of silver or gold. A talent would have weighed about 75 pounds. At today's prices, that's about \$42,000 for a talent of silver or slightly over \$2 million for a talent of gold. In that time, a talent represented 20 years' income for a day laborer. Even one talent was a lot of money to be entrusted with.

In that time, 2% of the population controlled the wealth and the fates of the other 98%. It was a steep pyramid, a steep and slippery slope to a family's downward mobility through loss of their own land, usually through debts they couldn't pay. This man going on an extended trip would have been one of the 2%, the only ones who could afford to travel for such extended periods. His wealth, these talents he entrusts to his highest-performing household retainers, would have come from exploiting those who live and work on his properties. The economy of that time and place was built on exploiting the agricultural, rural resources and population. Loans to peasant farmers used their land as collateral, and interest rates ranged from 60% to 200%, with foreclosure in bad crop years. Gaining ownership, and therefore control, of the land was the key strategy for increasing wealth, and the "retainers" (slaves) were key figures in implementing that strategy.

The first two retainers "went off at once" and doubled their master's money through skillful use of the exploitive economy—something they've already proved highly able to do. While returning a 100% profit, they also managed to collect some "honest graft" for themselves, which was the accepted practice of the time.

Jesus' and Matthew's listeners would have understood this scenario immediately, because they were living it. Any surplus their land produced went to pay the landowner, and that was on top of the taxes they had to pay to Rome and to the Temple.

The third slave, by burying his 75 pounds of silver, keeps it safe to return to the master. But he's also refusing to use it to continue the system of exploitation. By being buried ("hidden"), the talent cannot be used to force more people from their land through usurious loans. When the patron returns, this third retainer returns to the master that talent that is his. He also dares to speak the truth, and his honesty shocks everyone. "You are a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter seed." His honesty exposes the system for all to see.

This third servant pays for his honesty, of course. He is shamed and humiliated, called "wicked and lazy" to undercut the truth of what he has spoken, to discredit him. The New Testament scholar William Herzog calls this "the attack on a whistle-blower." The whistle-blower is cast into outer darkness, where of course there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. There are many in that outer darkness, weeping for the loss of their land and what little security they had, gnashing their teeth at the exploitation they are forced to live with. [*Parables as Subversive Speech*, by William R. Herzog II, 1994, p. 165. Chapter 10, "The Vulnerability of the Whistle-blower," contains Herzog's thorough discussion of this parable.]

In this interpretation of the parable, it's the first two servants who are wicked and evil because they perpetuate an unjust, oppressive system. The third servant becomes the good and faithful one by refusing to continue exploiting his neighbors. He pays a price for exposing the system and refusing to participate, but he accepts the cost of his actions and words. What has been hidden is now used to reveal the truth.

Parables work on multiple levels, and they don't have just one point or an easy answer. Parables draw us in, they cause us to wrestle, and ultimately they challenge us to decide for ourselves. Interesting that Jesus so frequently used parables in his teaching.

This parable does point to the truth of a God generous beyond all measure, in whose image we are created, who gifts each of us with talents and abilities and a certain amount of quirkiness.

This parable points to the truth of God's deep desire for each of us to cultivate and value and enjoy not only the unique talents and abilities we have been given, but also to call forth and value the talents and abilities of others.

This parable points to the truth of economic, institutional and political systems that exploit people for profit or pride.

This parable challenges me, and I hope each of us, to examine our own actions, the part we play in the systems of our lives.

May this parable challenge each of us to examine our own level of honesty with ourselves and with others.

What has been—is being—hidden in our own time? Who or what is being exploited for profit or pride? How has what has been hidden been used to reveal the truth? How are truth-tellers in our own time being discredited?

Funny how a 2,000-year-old parable seems so relevant to our own time.

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