

**Text:** Matthew 25: 14-30 (The Parable of the Talents)

Once upon a time there was a king, who had to travel on a long journey. Before leaving he chose his three most trusted advisors and gave them each responsibility to manage the parts of his kingdom that they were best suited to govern. To one, he gave the responsibility to oversee the infrastructure of the kingdom. To another, he gave responsibility to oversee the legal system of the kingdom. And to a third, he gave responsibility to oversee the education of all the children in the kingdom. As soon as the king left, his advisors began their work.

Many many years later, the king returned and one by one, he invited his advisors to bring him reports on the state of his kingdom. The first advisor appeared before the king and said, “Master, you made me responsible for the infrastructure of your kingdom. While you were away, we maintained the roads and sewers, but we also built new roads, many new buildings, a grand new market place, and we developed new technologies to make our work more efficient and safe.” The king replied, “Well done my friend! You have shown your wisdom in this area, so now I will put you in charge of even more responsibilities. Come join me at the royal feast and we shall celebrate!”

Then the second advisor appeared before the king and said, “Master, you made me responsible for the legal system of your kingdom. While you were away, we maintained the law and order of the land, but we also added new laws where they were needed to ensure that true justice was being done. We increased the rights and liberties of our citizens and we worked to remove corruption from our legal system.” The king replied, “Well done my friend! You have shown your wisdom in this area, so now I will put you in charge of even more responsibilities. Come join me at the royal feast and we shall celebrate!”

Then the third advisor appeared before the king and said, “Master, you made me responsible for the education of all the children in your kingdom. While you were away, we maintained the schools, curriculum, and teachers exactly as they were when you left. Nothing has been added. We haven’t changed the history books in thirty years, and we have made sure that any new theories of education have been squashed before they reached the classroom. We have not added a single volume to our libraries, and in fact we banned children from checking out books lest they damage the precious pages with their grubby hands. Test scores have not changed since you left, and we have not written any new songs or poems, no new artwork has been created, no new cures for diseases have been discovered.” Puffed up with the pride of his accomplishments, the advisor concluded, “Master, everything is completely maintained. Nothing has changed. All is as you left it.”

After pausing to take in everything that he had just heard, the king responded, “You foolish advisor! You thought that I wanted my kingdom merely maintained, did you? You thought that keeping things the same was the safest approach, did you? You thought that I would be pleased with this rigid, un-risking work, did you? Well, as I see it you have wasted the *talents* of a generation of children and have threatened the future of the kingdom. I am removing your responsibilities immediately and giving them to one of the other advisors who can be trusted. For to those who are wise will be given more opportunities to grow in wisdom, and we will all be blessed by them. But those who are foolish must lose their responsibility lest they bring danger to us all.” The king concluded, “As for this worthless advisor, who was so full of pride for his close-mindedness, toss him to the curb and let the loss of honor and respect be his punishment.”

To grow the gift, and in doing so risk losing it...or to preserve the gift by burying it in the ground where it will be safe but useless. This is the question of Jesus' parable. The final parable that he tells in the gospel of Matthew.

As recipients of God's gifts of grace, what are we to do? Risk or bury? For to each of us has been given particular talents, and the hope of this gift is that we will employ our skills, our time, our energy, our very lives in the service of our master. And in doing so to we will honor the great Giver of our gifts by using them in a way that shines greater light on God and exponentially grows God's gifts of love in the world. To risk or to burry? To respond to God's gifts with faith or with fear?

Once upon a time there was a woman who had been given a beautiful pair of earrings. They were made of pure gold with rubies, emeralds, sapphires and pearls, all glistening together in perfect bejeweled harmony. They were the most beautiful earrings in the world, and she knew this to be true. She loved her earrings so much that she was afraid to wear them outside the house lest one of them fall off and get broken, tarnished or lost. To keep her earrings safe she kept them home at all times. Soon, however, she began to fear even wearing them at home. “What if,” she wondered, “what if I were to stand near the window one day and a traveler walking by outside on the road were to glance up and glimpse the glimmer of my beautiful earrings. Surely, he would tell all whom he met along the road of their splendor, and soon the whole town would know that I possess the most beautiful earrings in the world. And surely once this word spreads, thieves, burglars, bandits, and intruders would assail my house day and night in search of these precious earrings to steal. No,” she said, “It cannot be risked!” and from then on she would not even wear the earrings at home.

Still, she was kept up at night, for fear that someone might break in to steal some of her other possessions, and in doing so might accidentally stumble across the earrings and pocket them as well. So one night, under the cover of darkness she went outside and buried the earrings in her yard. Finally, with the earrings out of sight, out of mind, and out of the house she could sleep in peace. And so she did for many years.

As she grew old, though, the thought crossed her mind that she might want to have the earrings placed on her ears after she died and was buried. But, of course, she feared that rumor of this would spread, and grave robbers would surely waste no time in taking them once she had been buried. So, she resolved to leave them in ground and never mention them to anyone. Finally, her last day came, and as she drew her final breath, her thoughts returned to her precious earrings—the most beautiful earrings in the entire world. As she died, she did so knowing they would be forever safe, buried in her yard, perfectly preserved, where no human eye would ever see their beauty.

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The plant that refuses to flower out of fear of being exposed. The teenager in school who refuse to let anyone see his musical gifts less be lose his precious spot on the totem pole of popularity. The parents that cling with a death grip to their children's lives out of fear, refusing to let them grow up on their own, into the people whom God is calling them to be. Fear takes many forms. And fear can downright petrify us.

Once upon a time there was a man who read his Bible every day. He did so because his parents had taught him how to, and they had taught him how to live by the black and white certainty that they had drawn from their interpretation of scripture. To honor his parents and their faith, this man determined to preserve their love of religion in a world he considered to be growing more and more faithless each day. He devoted himself to his study of scripture and to its “practical application” in his life. He read about sin and salvation and was quick to label those who he saw as either “sinners” or “saved.” This was what his parents had done, why should he do anything different. Wouldn’t breaking from their ways of seeing the world be a disservice to their memory? He was quick to point out who was included in God’s love and who was condemned to God’s punishment. He became a master of categorizing people into those who belonged and those who did not belong. In fact, he had so perfected this art, that when he saw someone walk past him on the street or sit next to him at church he could label them immediately based merely on their appearance. What a gift!

One day, this godly, Bible-minded man was walking along the road and spotted a man who was laying in a ditch. At first he determined him to be a “deadbeat” who had no goals or ambition in life. “Lying asleep in the middle of the day.” As he drew closer, he saw that the man’s clothes were torn and he was bruised and bleeding. “Ah,” he said, “not only a deadbeat, but a drunk as well. You can see the signs of last night’s bar fight on him as clear as day.” As he came even closer, the man in the ditch lifted up his weak voice and said, “Please help me, I was on my way from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped me, beat me, and went away, leaving me half dead.” The godly man passed by him, kept walking, and thinking to himself, “God has a plan for everyone, even for this drunk deadbeat. If it is his destiny to die on the side of the road, then who am I to interfere with God’s plan. But if it is his destiny to be helped then someone else will come along, the Lord will provide. Maybe even one of those filthy, half-bread Samaritans will stop and take pity on him. Oh how awful, to be indebted to one of those abominations! I’d better hurry along before one of them shows up.” How proud his parents would have been to see the reconciling word of God buried under generations of self-righteous close-mindedness.

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Once upon a time, there was a group of teenagers who had finished a long year of tedious school work. Some of them played sports, some of them worked jobs, some of them sang or played musical instruments or performed in school plays or were amazing artists, some of them volunteered with local outreach agencies, some of them were class officers in their school, some of them had endured a stress-filled year of college applications—these youth were a very, very, very busy group of *talented* people. And finally, after months of longing for it to come, summer finally arrived, and they knew they would be able to breath the freedom of homework free air. They had been given the gift of time. The gift of freedom. And with this gift of the summer came a question: would they bury their gift or would they risk it. Would they bury their gifts of time, energy, and talents deep deep down in a hole of self-consumption and entertainment? This is “my summer” to use as I see fit, and to enjoy however I want.” Or would they risk, would they risk “losing” a whole week of their summer to go on a mission trip to New Orleans. Would they risk a whole week without the comforts of television and air-conditioning to work in the hot, muggy, hurricane ravaged parts of Louisiana. Would they risk a week without being plugged into the constant, instantaneous communication networks of Facebook, Twitter, cell

phones and texting? Would they risk losing the gift of freedom and relaxation to travel to a land still in disarray, communities still grieving from floods and wind, beaches still covered with oil? Would they risk or would they bury? Well, today we have commissioned this group of 19 youth and adults who will go on behalf of this church to spend a week in New Orleans working with Presbyterian Disaster Assistance. These youth know that their lives are gifts from God, and their joy and hope are gifts made real for them in Christ. They know what they have been entrusted with these gifts by their master and they are responding to the risky call of God to honor the Giver of their gifts by investing them in a community far away, where their joy and their hope might be doubled in the lives of those they go to serve in Christ’s name.

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Once upon a time there was a church family, who had been given the gift of a beautiful building with a gorgeous sanctuary, a gym, a fellowship hall, and plenty of office and classroom space. When the call came from a community ministry asking if they would provide shelter for three homeless families for a week, they had a question to ask—To risk or to bury? Now, they could surely bury their gift of shelter with a number of perfectly justifiable reasons: we don’t know these people, what if something gets broken or stolen? The electrical bill will be higher from running the air conditioning to these rooms all night, and money doesn’t grow on trees you know. Plus, it’s a lot of work to provide meals and overnight hosts for a whole week, and the summer is a time when people are out of town a lot, it might be hard to find enough volunteers. They could have buried their gift. Instead, they took the risk. This church responded to the call to practice Christian hospitality. *This* church responded to the call to be good stewards of our resources. This church risked using themselves and their property in ways unknown to welcome three homeless families through the Greenville Area Interfaith Hospitality Network. This church family put to work the gifts that they have received from God—gifts of love and shelter, warmth and welcome—and put them to work in the world, having faith that God would use these gifts and bring them to fuller growth in the lives of those whom they would serve. This church refused to let fear be the determining factor in how they would respond to God’ call to minister in their community.

To risk or to bury? To respond to God’s gifts with faith or with fear? To live lives of love in response to God’s overabundant grace or to live safe, risk-free, lives of fear? This is the question of Jesus’ parable, and it is the question that each of us faces when we consider our response the overabundant grace of God. Do we dare to faithfully risk the gifts and talents that God has given us? Or do we, in fear, bury our gifts?

To Go be all glory and honor, now and forever. Amen.