

The Abundance In You

Matthew 25:14-30

A sermon preached by Zac Koons at St. Mark's Episcopal Church on November 15, 2020

I wonder if you have ever considered going all in. Devoting your life to the guitar above all else. To painting. To moving off the grid and living off the land. Maybe there was a class you took in college that captivated your imagination in a way that no other subject ever has but you never pursued it further because your parents told you it was impractical and wouldn't lead to a stable career but part of you always wonders if you might return to it one day. Maybe you were traveling in some other culture and you felt the beautiful landscape and strikingly different rhythms of life calling to you such that it had you secretly thinking: What if we never go back? I could see us being happy here, perhaps even happier than we have ever been back home.

This parable is about going all in for Jesus—about being brave, entrepreneurial, even risky in our lives of discipleship, in our tilling the field of the kingdom of God. This is kind of a problem because it feels like it is precisely what we can't do right now. Covid has put a kink in the hose of our church life together. Yes, we're doing our best—and I think quite well, actually, under the circumstances: you all are being faithful in worship, you are being extraordinary generous with your money since we can't send our bodies into spaces where we would like to help. You are learning how to use technology you never thought you would have a need for. You're reading books and arranging baby showers. Creativity flourishes in constraints and there is lots of wonderful and beautiful stuff happening around here.

But it's ok to admit that this all still kind of sucks. Sure, Zac's sermons are nice but man I miss breakfast tacos. I miss seeing and catching up with my church people without being paranoid about my mask that keeps slipping off my nose or your mask that keeps slipping off your nose. I miss just sitting in that familiar worship space while the organ plays in those sacred spare moments before a service starts; I miss watching the kids tear down the aisle towards Godly Play. I miss sharing my life—my struggles and joys and surprises—with people outside my household. I miss the choir—good Lord do I miss the choir; some of you even miss chanting. All of us, I know, miss feeling like a person with a body instead of a floating head zoom avatar with this week's coolest virtual background.

Jesus is telling us, give everything, risk everything, to pour your life into the kingdom of God, but in order to best love our neighbor, in order to care most for our most vulnerable, we must stay isolated from one another for a few months longer. Of course it's not impossible to still pour your life into God's in these circumstances but all I'm trying to point out is that the avenues available are not very conducive. It makes me wonder if we ought therefore to focus on a different part of this parable.

What if we focused not on our using of the talents, but on God's giving of them in the first place. The master gives five talents, two talents, and one talent to his servants. I wonder how many talents you think God has given you. I wonder if you're ever jealous of the talents God gave to others, or frustrated that God did not give you the ones you want.

There's actually a linguistic trick in this parable that is helpful to know at this point. The Greek word for "talent" *talenton*, does not mean "talent" in the way we normally use the word, like Caleb has a talent for videography. In Greek, talent specifically means a large sum of money—about 15 years worth of the average daily wage in the ancient world. But the trick is, in the symbolic world of the parable, it seems like though Jesus says money, he does actually mean something much closer to our modern understanding of "talent." The translator in our case has just cut out the middle man. But in doing so, we miss out on this important nuance, which is that God gives an abundance to everybody. Remember, one talent is itself an huge portion. Comparing five talents to one talent is not comparing someone who makes minimum wage to an investment banker. It is more like comparing an investment banker with Jeff Bezos. God doesn't distribute gifts and blessings equally—that is true—but it is still abundance all around. There is abundance in you. I wonder if you feel it.

In our Rector's Book Club, we just finished reading a book called *The Abundant Community*. Its authors diagnose our society as full of people who are generally unsatisfied with their lives, people who are unhappy because it feels like we never have enough—we don't have enough safety, we don't have enough health, we don't have enough money, our children don't get the right kind of education, and we don't have enough meaningful relationships. Most marketing is aimed in this direction: Do you feel unsafe? Move to this neighborhood! Upgrade your security system. Worried about your health? Go to Yelp to find the best doctor in town. Leading us to participate in an economy of constantly trying to buy our way out of unhappiness.

The authors of the book offer an alternative solution. They argue that the first step towards living a more satisfied life, the first step towards living in an abundant community, is to first focus on the gifts you and your community have already been given. Every neighborhood, every community, they argue, is a treasure chest of gifts waiting to be discovered.

Let me tell you a quick story: In our old house, it took me years to work up the courage to introduce myself to our across-the-street neighbors. Their shades were always drawn, they never put up Christmas decorations, they just didn't seem interested in being friendly, and frankly I was a little afraid of them. But finally when I did meet them, practically as we were about to leave the neighborhood for good, I learned that a.) one partner had been diagnosed with a horrible illness that came with frequent migraines that required the shades to always be shut and b.) the other partner was a very delightful, recently retired HVAC repair man who was more than happy to come over and fix for free what I had already spent thousands of dollars trying to fix with the best yelp-reviewed professional I could find. The point isn't just that you can get free favors from your neighbors if you try hard enough, but what we both received after that was a house that before felt like an eery threat into a new friend I could pray for and talk to and text to look after our house when we were out of town. Most important of all, we had both received a relationship, had between us formed a new small community, into which we could both offer our gifts.

God has made each of us, each of you, as his beloved "beautifully individuated" (Marilynne Robinson) creatures, and has bestowed upon you a unique abundance of talents. There is deep joy in the giving. Notice in the parable that the last thing the master says to the servants he is praising is "Enter into my joy." Surely you have experienced this at some point. Offering your gifts in the context of your community for free to build a better common life with your neighbors is where true joy comes from. Most churches are already participating in this kind of abundant economy. Our church is a place that brings people's gifts together into multi-layered

associations of interest and talent not only to make our worship function properly and thereby connect us to God, but to build up our common life to best take care of our neighbors through our outreach attempts. But I wonder if there are gifts in our community that we are missing? I wonder what gifts you have that we don't know about? I wonder what gifts God has given you that you don't even know about?

The point is, how can we go all in if we don't know what cards we have been dealt in the first place? What if this unique season of our church life is a time where we can step back and consider again what gifts are already present in our community? And even more, what if this unique season is bringing forth new gifts in our midst? What if it is rearranging our imagination for what is possible in this place?

Something only a small number of people at St. Mark's know is that we were about 3 days from writing a rather large check to an architecture firm before the first lockdown order came. They were going to lead our congregation through a master planning process to imagine, troubleshoot, and design new possibilities for our structure and property. I have no doubt that that process would have resulted in something beautiful and useful for us. But I also am confident that when the time comes to take up the question of renovations and architects again, we will build something different than we would have before all this. Because this is changing us. And though we hope we never have to walk through something like this pandemic again, and we more than anything it never would have happened, I also believe it is possible that we as disciples and we as a church are being refined into something more beautiful and more useful to God's kingdom than would have happened had the previous 9 months been normal. I believe God is opening our hearts to our community and our vulnerable neighbors in ways they haven't been opened before. I believe God is establishing in our community a hunger for deeper spiritual lives of prayer and devotion. I believe that even now God is doling out diverse abundances of gifts.

The question is not how much of your life, your gifts and your talents, does God want you to give. God want you to go all in. That's clear in this parable and throughout the Bible. The question for today is what gifts has God bestowed on you in the first place. And don't forget, you are playing with house money. Everything you have to give God gave in the first place so that you would have the joy of offering those gifts to the world. In a deep theological sense God actually really wants you to experience joy. I hope you spend some time today and this week and this month thinking about it. Because I can't wait to hear what you learn. And I can't wait to see what you bring for the betterment of our church and our community.

Amen.