

“Prosper the Work of Our Hands”

**Sermon by Rev. Sage S. Rohrer**

**November 13, 2005 The Swedenborgian Church of San Francisco**

**Matthew 25:12-30**

**Psalm 90**

It's been getting colder. As a girl from Maine, cold for me is definitely relative, but my senses have begun to adjust to the subtleties of San Francisco seasons and I do sense that winter is coming on. The usual markers of rows of red and yellow, browning, dying leaves, aren't here to harken in the winter as they did back in Maine, but the rain is starting to move in and the night comes early. The sun sets before I get home from work, I prepare dinner in darkness.

As winter approaches we are reminded of the reality of death. In the Psalm that I read to you this morning we are reminded again of our deaths. We are reminded of our mortality in the face of God's constancy.

“Before the mountains were brought forth,  
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,  
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

You turn us back to dust ,  
and say, “Turn back you mortals.”

For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past,  
or like a watch in the night.

You sweep them away; they are like a dream,  
like grass renewed in the morning;  
in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;  
in the evening it fades and withers.” (Psalm 90: 2-6)

You sweep us away, like a dream. This is the one Psalm in scripture attributed to the Biblical figure Moses. Moses, the man who saw God in the burning bush and led the Israelites out of Egypt and the man who never made it into the promise land, the man who lives on in our understanding, through the re-telling of his story in scripture, but in his human life span lived and died long ago, a blip in the human continuum.

“From dust we are born, and to dust we will return.”

And in our own life span, in this blip of the human continuum that we all seem to find ourselves on together this morning, in the face of death, a death that is so sure and so final how is it that we live?

What does prosperity look like when it is measured in the face of death?

I believe this is the key to interpreting the New Testament scripture that I read to you this morning. This parable is one of three that Jesus tells about his second coming, or the coming of the kingdom of God. The Master in the story is the Lord God, the servants are you and me. We are each entrusted with a measure of talents, we are

given no specific instructions on how to use these talents but we understand that we will be expected to show our master when they return that we have prospered with them in some way. There is someone holding us accountable someone by whom we measure our worth.

I want to look at this parable from the perspective of the servant who is least prosperous. It is from this vantage point that I find the story beginning to come alive for me. Imagine yourself. You have just received one talent, now a talent is fairly large sum of money, it is not just a coin or two, it is an entire 15 years wage. This is a sum of money that has possibilities. And perhaps you could see these possibilities if you were not to have just received this one talent while watching two of your peers/friends/possibly even siblings receiving twice and five times the amount that you have received. Where among different company you may feel abundant, in comparison to the company that you keep you feel as if you have very little.

You watch as those who have more than you immediately go out and trade their wealth, investing it in the community and earning from it. You become jealous. You feel small and unworthy in comparison to others. You begin to see yourself as having very little and you begin to believe that your one talent cannot prosper in the world. You curse your master, angry that he has deemed you less able or less worthy than the others. After experiencing this anger you begin to feel fear. You wonder how you can succeed with so little. You fear that you have so little, that you are so worthless that you might lose

everything. And you fear that when your master returns you will have less than a little to show him, you will have nothing. You are already beginning to fear that you do have nothing. And so you bury your one talent in the ground so you won't risk losing it.

Have you done this? Have you compared yourself with others to the point where it has debilitated your belief in yourself? Have you looked at yourself as less worthy and from this feeling of lack given up on trying all together?

Consider your life and all that you do. Think of how you measure in different aspects of your life. Perhaps you are a very good public speaker and are rewarded for this talent using it to help you succeed at your work. In public speaking you are similar to the servant who received 5 talents and quickly went out and prospered using this gift. In this part of your life you have an abundance. Maybe you can name lots of areas in your life where this is true? But where in your life might you measure yourself as having received a lesser number, only 1 talents, are there secret singular talents that you have buried away out of fear of failure?

Maybe you're a great public speaker but you're not the best communicator with your wife or your husband, you have trouble articulating your feelings and so instead of trying and risking failure, you give up. Failure is a kind of death you know. In burying these talents away, these talents that you deem less worthy less able we

trap ourselves in the status quo, we hide from growth and change, in not risking the death of possible failure we end up risking life.

The least servant in this parable is not killed by the master, but it is worse, the servant is cast out into the outer regions, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. The servant is cast into hell.

What is hell for you?

When I really think about it, when I think about the worst times in my life, they really are during those times when am vainly and desperately holding onto the status quo. When I see myself as so lacking that I believe I cannot possibly succeed and I give up. This is hell for me. This is stagnation, it is a closed heart, it is desperate self-preservation, it is fear.

This is hell that we actually do choose. The status quo is easier, it is known. Going after and using our obvious talents we are not risking because we can anticipate the outcome, we know that we will succeed, we have an observable track record. It is using and exercising the talents that we do not know will pan out for us where the real work lies. This is the most important work, and it is the work that is the most difficult.

You can see this on macro and micro scales. Currently the debate over traditional family values and marriage equality is heavily influenced by this fear of the unknown, fear of abandoning the status

quo. History is marked with this cultural battle of resisting change. And change always wins. And it wins often as the voices of those in the margins, who have been deemed less worthy stand up and use and claim their voice, their talent, their rights.

I think of the inventors that have changed the world, how they have followed their dreams, which to those around them likely seemed ridiculous and wild. They ventured into the unknown, they risked failure, and in doing so changed the world.

I challenge you to consider where you feel small, unworthy, strange, incapable in your life. A place where you believe you have less than other people, perhaps where you are afraid of persecution, a secret talent that you have buried away. I challenge you to consider what might happen if you could bring this small buried talent into the world. I challenge you to consider that this talent is in fact not small, that it only feels small, and that as you use it and manifest it in the world it can only become more abundant. We are only dust and to dust we will return, who are we not to risk dying?

In risking death with live, in coming to know death we are able to be born anew. It is in this experience of risking death that our true greatness can emerge, our gifts for the world, our gifts for God, for our families, our divine talents. We must actively choose heaven and this does require work, work and faith, and this is what slowly, inch by inch draws the holy city closer to our world.