

Living as though dead
Matthew 25:14-30, Pentecost 27, Year A
16 November 2008
By The Reverend Barkley Thompson

Roxanne Connaughton was surprised to hear that she was dead. Her story was in *The Roanoke Times* last week.¹ Mrs. Connaughton was going about her normal routine several weeks ago when her debit card was rejected at Target. Then she had a minor gardening accident and had to go to the emergency room. When the claims clerk attempted to input her Medicare data, he informed a rather surprised Roxanne, that she was, in fact, dead. The problem pursued Roxanne to election day, when a worker at her polling station told her that in Roanoke, unlike Chicago, the dead are not allowed to vote. “But how could you kill me?” Mrs. Connaughton is quoted as asking, “To know me is to love me!” Ultimately, the mistake was traced to a data entry error at the Social Security office in Roxanne’s hometown in upstate New York. It’s been corrected, and Roxanne is happy to be back among the living.

The newspaper article reminded me of a Tobias Wolff short story in which the obituary writer for a big city newspaper is surprised—and ultimately fired—when the subject of one of his obituaries walks through the door of his office very much alive.² The not-so-deceased man, Ronald Givens, actually shuffles in behind his angry and strident wife. It is the wife who demands that the writer lose his job; Ronald himself feebly attempts to excuse the error. Someone fraudulently had called in the death notice, and the obit writer had not taken the time to check its accuracy. Under the accusing stare of Ronald’s wife, the newspaper editor is unforgiving, and the obit writer is told to clean out his desk. Later, as the writer is leaving the building with his box of belongings under his arm, Ronald Givens, the “dead man,” regretting what has happened, shuffles over from the corner newsstand and invites him to lunch.

The two go to a nearby luncheonette, and the writer shifts to investigative mode, trying to figure out who would have called in Ronald’s fraudulent death notice. He rules out every potential culprit until finally the reporter has a flash of insight, “It was *you*,” he says to Ronald Givens, “*You* did it.”

The truth is clear on Ronald’s face, and he stumbles out of the booth and struggles to get away. The writer is left to wonder why a man would choose to call in his own obituary, would choose to live as though dead. Of Ronald he says, “The words of death had been pronounced on

¹ Saturday, November 8, 2008, Virginia section.

² Wolff, Tobias. “Mortals,” in *The Night in Question*, pg. 3-13.

him, and now his life would be lived in relation to those words, in failing opposition to them, until they overpowered him and became true.”

It’s an intriguing thought, isn’t it? Calling in our own obituaries, declaring to the world that we are dead, though we may—like Roxanne Connaughton or Ronald Givens—still breathe, walk, and talk. The most notable thing, though, about Tobias Wolff’s story is *not* that Ronald Givens places his own obituary, but rather the reader’s uncomfortable realization that doing so is oddly the logical next step in Ronald’s life. Ronald has shuffled through life with hunched shoulders and down-turned eyes, finding meaning and purpose in only his own narrow field of vision. His living never looks beyond himself. There is nothing *transcendent* in his connection to the world. He is *already* living as though he were dead; posting the obituary merely acknowledges that fact.

Today in Matthew’s Gospel Jesus tells the Parable of the Talents: A master going on a journey summons his three slaves and entrusts his wealth to their care. The slaves are paupers; until the master gives them such treasure they have nothing. The monetary unit mentioned in the parable is a “talent.” One talent was equal to fifteen year’s wages for a day laborer. It was a huge sum, and so whether a slave is given five talents, two, or one is inconsequential. Even a single talent is a virtual lifetime of wealth, and this audacious gift the master bestows upon each one of his slaves. He then leaves them to nurture the treasure, and when he returns, he asks *how they have lived*.

For the first two, the conversation is an easy one. They have embraced the talents given them. They have used them with relish out in the world in the service of their master, even taking risks when necessary, and through their use the talents themselves have been increased and expanded, and the slaves’ lives have been made more abundant.

The third slave, though, has done no such thing. In fact, he’s done *nothing* with what have been given him. One gets the impression that since the master’s departure this third slave has remained paralyzed in one spot. He may have twittered about like Ronald Givens, with his seemingly important insular concerns, but he has not employed his talent in the master’s service. Instead, he has buried it in the ground like a corpse. He has misunderstood the master’s generosity. He has failed to recognize the gift as something that calls for a response, that calls for him to act, to *live differently*. In light of such a profound gift—a profound opportunity—the slave has lived as though he were dead.

“Why?” we ask. The master wonders the same thing. The slave’s response is *fear*. He is afraid of a master whose motives he does not trust and therefore who he cannot love. Apart from love, the slave doesn’t believe that the master has granted him such talent so that he might flourish. “I was afraid,” the slave says, “and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, have what is yours.” Unused and covered with the dirt and grime of the grave, he hands his talent back to the master.

The connection between the biblical monetary unit and our English word “talent” is not incidental. Our word derives from the one in Scripture. The “talents” with which *we* are endowed—our natural skills and abilities, our passions and drives, our affections, empathy, and intuitions—are given to us by a gracious master. They are given, to riff on the words of Jesus, that we might have life and that abundantly. And to *each* of us, like the slaves in Matthew, God gives more than we can scarcely imagine. At the very least, we are given minds to reflect, tongues to speak, and hearts to love. Beyond that, we are each gifted with distinctive and even unique talents. Just think about the talents *you* have.

We haven’t earned them. They have been audaciously given when we were but empty-handed paupers. And to *live* means nothing less than to embrace our talents, whatever they may be in each of us, *in the service of the One who gives them*: taking risks, meeting challenges, submitting the whole of who we are and what we have been given to God’s great project of reconciliation and love.

How often do we bury our talents? Or put another way, how often do we use them for only our own narrow ends in the world rather than risk them for God’s, thinking that our own visions for our lives are better than God’s expansive vision? How often do we walk through the world like Ronald Givens, slump-shouldered and hesitant, *afraid* of a God we don’t really trust—not really—and therefore afraid of what God might ask of us—what he might call us to do, where he might send us, how he might reorient our comfortable priorities—if we were to dig up those talents and use them in the light of his day? When we look at our lives, do we find that we phoned in the obituary long ago?

Gordon Atkinson tells the story of how as a child he would lay on his pillow at night and invariably hear the sound of someone crunching through the snow outside his window. Gordon was terrified. Lifting his head off the pillow to hear better, the footsteps would cease, but as soon as he lie down again, he would hear them. For weeks his fear grew. Gordon would lie there still, as though dead, as he wondered who the one outside his window might be and what he might want. Then one night as his fear swelled, Gordon realized that the footsteps outside his

window sped up as his own heart raced ever faster. And then it clicked. The “crunch, crunch, crunch” he thought he heard in the snow outside was actually the pulse of his own temple on his pillow. What Gordon feared was his own beating heart. His fear paralyzed him with the inability to recognize the very thing that gave him life.

What if we trusted God and his love for us? What if we believed that what he wants for us ever and only is our flourishing on his behalf, which in turn causes the world to flourish? To each of us God give recklessly, audaciously, *graciously*. The talents with which we are blessed cannot be counted. What might God be calling you to do with yours? Used lavishly for God’s purposes before our own, our talents give life. It is time we unbury them and use them for God’s work in the world. It is time we walk into the obituary office at the newspaper and say, “Hold the presses! Reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated. I am alive!”

Amen.