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“The Gift of Being Average”

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Acts 1:6–14; Psalm 68:4–10, 32–35; Matthew 25:14–30

One of my favorite television shows these days is “The Cash Cab.”

Its premise is this:

the host, Ben Bailey, a really tall guy who drives a taxi cab in New York City, picks up unsuspecting customers, ascertains their destination, and then lights and bells start going off in his cab when Bailey informs his customers that he will drive them all the way to their destination if they will be contestants on this Discovery Channel question and answer game.

If they agree, they will be awarded gradually increasing cash rewards for correct answers to questions

which get gradually more difficult as the game and journey progress.

If they can answer questions correctly all the way to their destination, without missing more than three, they can earn double or nothing on the last question, if they so desire, and possibly arrive at their doorstep richer than when they first stepped off the curb.

But, if they trip up, miss-answering to any three questions,

they are dumped onto the sidewalks of New York, no matter where they are, with no reward, no umbrella, and no guarantees about finding that next cab.

Oh, and the contestants are not left helpless in their quest for correct answers.

They have two options: If they find themselves befuddled by a question,

they can pull over to the curb once and perform a “street shout-out”
to any pedestrian who they think possibly might know an answer;
or they can perform a “mobile shout-out” via cell-phone
to a knowledgeable friend who also might be a fount of information.

Most contestants seem to be pretty good sports, from what I can tell,
some better than others at relying upon their own acumen.

The key to success seems to be their ability to ascertain when it is time
to reach beyond the limits of their personal knowledge
and use those shout-outs for help.

I like this game because it takes me back to my childhood,
when my father thought it was “cool” for us to play College Bowl
about once a week around the dinner table.

He, of course, would pick all of the questions, for myself and my two younger brothers,
one of who was probably still in diapers
but who was the smartest in the lot even then.

My father would invariably start off with quotes, whose sources we were to identify, like:

“Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth on this continent
a new nation...” (Abraham Lincoln)

“The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” (Franklin D. Roosevelt)

“Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.”
(John F. Kennedy)

“Shazam!” (Gomer Pyle)

And among these, he would interject trick questions like “Who's buried in Grant's tomb?”
and “When was the war of 1812?”

It was a wild ride at the dinner table to see
who could answer the fastest without choking on his or her meatloaf,
who could outwit my father at his own game,
which we knew he only played to make himself appear smarter
than the rest of us,
and who could lose nobly without dissolving into tears!

It was kind of like Cash Cab with lots of questions to answer.

But it was not like Cash Cab in that there was no cash, no cab, and no opportunities for shout-outs. You either knew your facts yourself or you were wrong.

In retrospect, I'm not sure about the ultimate value of such an exercise, where reaching out for help is invalid in achieving success.

Jesus tells a story that reminds me of The Cash Cab.

And graduates, I want to flag all of the good news here so that you will not miss its implications for you!

Jesus' disciple-graduates are huddled around him on the Mount of Olives, scratching their heads and wondering about when the world will really end, and the truth about this kingdom-of-heaven ideal, and he cues them in as much as he is able by means of a parable.

He tells the parable of a host about to depart on a journey, who before leaving delivers the sum total of his earthly goods, worth quite a bit of money, to three servant-contestants, each according to his ability, whatever that might mean.

Apparently he trusts them implicitly because he just doles it all out, and then he takes leave of them with no specific instructions as to what to do, or what he expects of them, or if or when he might return.

Sounds like a set-up to me.

To one, perhaps with great academic gifts, perhaps with great athletic abilities, perhaps a musical prodigy with a wicked sense of humor; to this uber-gifted one, the host gives a gift equivalent to five days wages.

To a second, an average-type guy with perhaps an eighth grade education, with perhaps the ability to play a mean honky-tonk piano by ear, with perhaps a great love of animals, the host gives a gift equivalent to two days wages.

And to the third contestant, whose minute of fame once upon a time perchance was a one-hit-wonder, the host gives the equivalent of a day's wage—

that's all.

*Friends, hear the good news: the host gives something to all contestants;
no one is left wanting.*

All are gifted by the host, regardless of their abilities or disabilities.

At this point in the story or game, everyone has equal opportunity to succeed or to fail. Some will rise and some will fall.

And all are equally clueless as to what is expected of them.

I am reminded of Simeon's departing words to Mary upon laying eyes on the infant Jesus, God's most valuable gift, for the first, maybe last time. "This gift," he says, "is destined to cause the falling and rising of many."

So it now seems in Jesus' parable.

At this point, the story that Jesus tells picks up speed considerably, the Cash Cab barreling down streets of New York City.

The uber-talented recipient wastes no time in trading up his or her five-day wage, which resorts in a doubling of the initial gift.

The modestly-gifted recipient, likewise, trades up with all he or she has, and likewise doubles the initial gift.

But the one-hit-wonder doesn't even try to use or multiply his or her gift, opting instead to hoard it, to hide it, to sock it away for future consideration.

Two of the characters act upon their giftedness; they take action; they do something.

The uber-talented recipient does something that involves risk, and the modestly-gifted recipient does something that involves risk.

Only the third recipient chooses the safe, risk-free option.

If these were contestants on The Cash Cab, I would guess that the first contestant would have no trouble in reaching out for help, in using both his street shout-out and mobile-shout out, to multiply his resources and base of knowledge.

The second contestant, likewise, would have no trouble in reaching out for help, perhaps choosing to use at least one means of shout-out to expand what he is able to know and do.

Those of us who are people of faith know that we rarely have all the answers ourselves.

We frequently and often shout out to God and solicit the help of those
who seem to have walked this way before or who seem more
full of faith than ourselves on any given day.

We call this phenomenon "community" or "interdependence," where the
whole of our life together is greater than the sum of our many parts.

The third contestant in The Cash Cab doesn't even try to answer the questions,
I imagine, nor does he bother to reach out to those on the street
or those just a phone call away. He is frozen in his singular giftedness,
barreling quickly down the road to nowhere.

And so, surprise, the sojourner returns to settle his accounts.

The five talent recipient, who has doubled his giftedness, gets two high fives,
and the affirmation of the host: "Excellent, good and faithful servant!

The divine party is just starting. Come and join me in the celebration."

And the two-talent recipient, who also has doubled his giftedness, gets a double fist bump
and the very same affirmation from the host: "Excellent, good and faithful servant!

The divine party is cranking up. Come on and join me in the celebration."

Excuse me, I know the story is not over, the conclusion not yet reached,
but I feel this is some incredibly good news sandwiched in the middle
of the yet incomplete story. Did you notice it?

*The two-talent recipient, the average guy, the one who didn't make straight A's,
the one who can't read music, the one who never earned accolades as
a sports stand out, the one who loves animals;*

*this guy is rewarded by the host just as richly as the
uber-gifted guy, and invited to the divine party, too.*

I don't know about you, but I find this to be a point of grace in this story,
a good tiding of great joy.

I, for one, do not come from a family with an outstanding pedigree.

Not one of my grandparents ever went to school beyond the eighth grade;
all of them had to drop out of school to work during the Great Depression.

My father and mother were the first generation in either of their families
to graduate from college.

They were average. They worked hard.

They tried to make the most of what they had been given.

In looking back, I think one of the most valuable legacies my parents and my grandmother,
especially, bequeathed me was the image of stacks of books, either
on the back of the sofa or beside the bed.

They were avid readers and constant learners.

They cherished and nurtured the book stalagmites that seemed
to grow behind their shoulders on the sofa or totter close to
tipping at the foot of their beds.

They never gave up trying to multiply what they knew by reading more.

I think about them often as I peer at the stacks of books beside my bed,
castigating myself for being such a lousy housekeeper;

reminding myself that it's not about housekeeping; it's about mind-keeping
and using all the gifts available to us through God's graciousness.

Robert Capon calls this parable of Jesus a tale of faith in action.

*The grace, he notes, is of acceptance of the gifts God gives
and the unaccountable, even irresistible joy of the Lord who wants **everybody**
to be joyful with him.*

"It is the theme of the divine party that lurks beneath the surface of history,
and calls only for a recognition by faith," he says.

"It is the fatted calf served up for a prodigal who did nothing but come home in faith.
It is the free champagne and caviar for the wedding guests who did nothing but trust
the king's insistence on providing fancy costumes and party hats.

It is the full pay for next to no work at all given to grape pickers
who just said yes to a last minute promise.

The only reason that judgment comes into it at all is the sad fact
that there will always be dummies who refuse to trust a good thing
even when it's handed to them on a platter." (Capon, *Parables of Judgment*, p. 168)

Which is precisely what the uni-talented contestant chooses to do.

The only thing he has to fear is fear itself... and he does.

He fears the negative reaction of the host, whom he totally misjudges
in his delusional way of thinking.

And he fears his own failure, which makes him refuse to even try to succeed,
choosing the risk-free option of not acting upon the trust which the host
has placed in him,

choosing to opt for good housekeeping over good mind-keeping.

And quickly and severely, the host casts him out of The Cash Cab into the rain,
where there is much weeping and gnashing of teeth,
with no prize money, no umbrella, and no help in catching the next cab.

But, who knows, maybe the one-hit wonder will get it right the next time;
maybe The Cash Cab will come his way again, and the invitation
to God's divine kingdom party will be on the seat next to him,
right beside the fancy costume and party hat.

Friends, graduates, you are leaving school with some incredible gifts.

Some of you are multi-talented valedictorians, straight-A students,
star athletes, prize-winning scholars and writers, scholarship-recipients,
and some of you are average two-talent and even one-talent youth,
beloved and precious, each and every one of you.

Your education and your Christian education are neither guaranteed cash cab
nor prosperity gospel, but they are your ticket to ride,
to put your faith into action, and to use your many gifts and talents.

The God who created and loves you has gifted you *all* in many ways, sufficiently to serve.

And God who has gifted you, has provided and encouraged you to
use all and every shout-out available to you—
we call that prayer and faith community,

God ever listening, faith family ever available.

Don't be afraid or embarrassed to use your shout-outs frequently and often.

And, as I always preach to my own children, interdependence should be your ultimate goal and not merely independence.

Be ready and willing in the days ahead to use your gifts, every one of them, as God calls you and as Jesus models for you, responding with immediacy in love, not fear, to this world and to God's call upon your heart.

Wendell Berry, farmer-poet, has this stunning last stanza to one of his poems, which I want to leave with you as closing words:

*Even then you will remember
this history of love, shaped
in the shapes of flesh, everchanging
as the clouds that pass, the blessed
yearning of body for body,
unending light.
You will remember, watching
the clouds, the future of love.
(Wendell Berry. *A Timbered Choir*, p. 177)*

May your future be so blessed by the love God and by the love and encouragement of this great cloud of witnesses. Amen.