

November 19 – I Was Afraid

Matthew 25:14-20

The story of the Talents is a familiar one. It is such a part of our experience that it gave to us our current definition of the word talent. When we watch the show “America’s Got Talent” we know we will be watching people share all sorts of gifts with us from singing, to ventriloquism to dance. They are sharing, after all their talents. Yet, when Jesus told this parable, a talent was a unit of measure for coinage. An example today would be a troy ounce. None of us would watch a television show highlighting a pile of gold or silver ingots. This parable changed forever the meaning of the word talent.

To get at the idea of the value of a talent of silver, the Bible does not tell us whether the talent is of silver or gold, a working person could expect to earn about 2 shekels a week or 8 shekels a month. A talent was worth 3,000 shekels. So, a talent is approximately the salary one would earn at basic rates over 30 years. Using our minimum wage this would come out to \$650,000 so ten talents would be 6.5 million dollars.

Yet, when we read this story, we don’t think about the value of the money. Talent has become synonymous with ability and we hear within it a challenge to use the gifts God has given to us. To not do so is being like the unfaithful one and burying our gifts. We are further told that if we are faithful we will find more and more ways we can bless others. This understanding, as I said, has so imbedded itself into our culture that if you were to ask ten people on the street to define talent my guess is that not one would say, “An ancient coinage weight.”

The actions of the last person, the one who did not do anything with his talent, burying it in the ground is where we need to address our focus in this parable. Why did he act this way? He tells us, “He was afraid.” What was he afraid of? First of all, he was afraid of failure. He was thinking, “What if I try something and it doesn’t work out?” I want you to think about how often fear of failure has stopped you from doing what God is calling you to do. Here are a few examples of fear stopping people that I have gleaned from a lifetime of ministry.

I recall one time we decided that we would challenge everyone in the congregation to invite a neighbor to our Christmas Eve service. We created handouts to

give out and made sure that everyone knew that it was going to be a “guest” friendly service. Yet, more than one person told me afterwards that they had not invited anyone. They didn’t use the words, “I was afraid” yet fear had kept them from handing out the invitations. They worried that an invitation would offend their neighbor. They didn’t want to come off acting like someone from one of those churches whose members arrive on your doorstep to proclaim the faith. Some admitted that they feared it might cause someone to be angry with them or quit talking to them. By not inviting some of their neighbors they kept them from having an opportunity to encounter God in Christ. These people, out of fear, buried their talent in the ground.

I visit with people who are upset or frustrated that their children and/or grandchildren never to go church. When asked if they have ever had a conversation about their feelings they often admit to being afraid of talking about it. Now I realize that if every time you have a conversation with a child or grandchild they hear, “Why don’t you go to church?” that might cause problems. Or if they hear, “Your lifestyle is wrong.” and it is done in the name of faith it will cause estrangement. We are challenged to love people where they are but also need to have the courage to make sure they understand that this also means loving us for where we are.

I recall a woman telling this story. She was a faithful person in church. As her children grew up they grew away from church. When they came home for a visit, at first she stayed home on Sunday mornings with them because she didn’t want things to be awkward. She felt so bad about this that she finally quit staying home. On Sundays she would get up, make them a nice breakfast and tell them she would see them in 90 minutes or so. She didn’t apologize for going or pressure them to come. She just, by her actions said, church is important to me. There was some grumbling but after a couple of years one of the grandchildren said, “Grandma, can I come with you?” They were intrigued about what was so important to get up early and leave family. Over time, most of the family decided to attend church with her when they were at her house. At least one of her grown grandchildren is now active in a church. Never letting family know the importance of faith to you and your prayer that it be a part of their life is hiding your talent because you are afraid.

When we move beyond faith there are many other places where we hide from discussions. I don't know how often I have children saying to me, "Mom or Dad never talk to me about their health, their finances, their plans if they become disabled, about their wishes in dying and more." For a lot of reasons we lock people out of important parts of our lives because of fear. It might be fear that we will lose independence if we tell them what is really going on! It might be fear that if we speak it we will also have to admit that we are not doing as well as that image we project to the world. It might be fear that we will cause them pain or to worry about us. So we are challenged to move beyond fear.

The other fear that is expressed by the one servant who did nothing was the fear that God was judgmental. He knew the master to be a harsh man reaping where he did not sow and gathering where he did not scatter seeds. No where are we told if this is a realistic assessment of the master. In fact, other details in the story would assume otherwise. He entrusted the servants with large amounts of resources. There is no words of "make money with this or else." He trusted that they would be prudent and resourceful. Does that sound like a harsh overseer? It doesn't feel that way to me. Also, to make money you have to risk. Just giving the money to the bankers would be free of risk but there would be little return. It sounds as if their interest rates are no better than ours! To double your investment you would have to risk. Now risk can be prudent or reckless but it is still a risk. The first two risked and, yes, they did well. It would be assumed that they realized that if they had taken a risk and it had not turned out so well they did not fear the master's reprisal. They assumed he valued the effort as much as any result.

Too long the church has promoted a judgmental God instead of a loving and forgiving God. We seemed to believe that we had to scare the Hell out of people. We assumed all were like the one talent servant and, without them being afraid of what might happen if they failed, they would just squander their lives. Yes, they held on to the treasure but because there was no risk there was not often gains for the kingdom. Throughout our history, the church has done great things when people have been willing to risk. We have been blessed with those who decided that God would celebrate

the effort as much as what might happen. When we have moved from fear of what might be to riskily living into what God imagines, great things have occurred.

Let me give you two examples. The Methodist Church grew mightily during the early years of our country thanks to the selflessness of the early Circuit Riders. For those of you who do not know about this part of our history, circuit was the title given to a group of churches or territory that a minister was assigned to give spiritual direction. As pioneers moved westward the pastors followed sharing the faith. These circuits were huge and called upon the clergy person assigned to be on the road most of the time. The early Sequim community was part of a circuit that stretched from Port Townsend to Cape Flattery, down to Quinault. One of the early circuit riders was Brother Mac who walked everywhere, unless he was given a ride on a steamship. He never bought a ticket because it was too expensive. They stayed with whomever would put them up, eating what was set before them and sleeping outdoors if nothing was available. The average age of a circuit rider was late 20's and by their late 30's they had either quit traveling and served one small church as a local pastor or had died from the effects of being out in all sorts of weather. Yet, because they risked all, we expanded mightily as a church. But if you think I want a large circuit, on the road all the time I think the answer is no. Perhaps in this area I am like the one talent person!

One more who was willing to risk and face failure was the Apostle Paul. He was stoned by angry crowds, beaten with rods by Roman authorities, shipwrecked several times, faced bandits on the road and was even whipped. He was chased out of synagogues and towns and yet he persisted. He did not fear that God would punish him if he tried and failed. He was concerned that he would be condemned if he didn't try as faithfully as he could to answer the call.

So, where has fear, fear of how others might react to you, fear that God will be angry if you fail, or just fearful of failing, or perceived as acting foolishly, kept you from using your gifts and talents as God would call you to use them? Wherever we see this happening, we are like the servant given the one talent. The good news is today is a new day. The master has not returned, we have another chance. God has given you blessings to be used so they will multiply. What are you called to do today?