

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal, Proper 28A, Matthew 25:14-30 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

Our church year is coming to an end. Next Sunday is Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday of the church year; and then, the first Sunday in December will be Advent, a whole new church year. Since June, we've been looking at the stories of Genesis and Exodus, and then continuing the narrative with brief glimpses of Deuteronomy, Joshua, and today Judges, our only appearance of that book in our three-year lectionary cycle. Next year we will turn to Samuel, and the story of the kings of Israel. Next year, we will turn away from the Gospel of Matthew and focus on the Gospel of Mark.

Today we have one more parable from Matthew, and it's one of four so-called advent parables in the Gospel of Matthew, because just like the parable last week, it looks ahead to Christ's second coming. Last week, Jesus taught us in the parable of the ten bridesmaids about the importance of being prepared. Today, we hear about the importance of not being afraid.

The Bible is a diverse collection of sacred literature, and sometimes we get caught up in random strands of it. But there are some core themes, like resurrection. New life. Forgiveness. The people of God continually turn away from God, repent, and are forgiven.

Another core theme is fear. We people of God are afraid, and God tells us, through angels, through parables, through psalms and countless stories and letters:

Don't be afraid.

Don't be afraid is a core theme, core narrative, a core value: whatever you want to call it.

Now, the whole "throw this worthless slave into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth"—I'm tempted to have a word with Jesus here and say, um, Jesus, if "don't be afraid" is a core theme, threatening to throw people into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth maybe isn't the best way to *not* scare them. But hyperbole is a hallmark of parables, so, I get it.

I also completely understand the scared slave who hid his single talent. A talent was an enormous sum of money, entrusted to him by the man who had total control over his life. I can understand the urge to hide it; to protect it.

But it was meant to grow. To be shared.

Fear gets in the way.

Those of us who are married or have been married know that marriage is hard. One of Gary and my ongoing fights is about the core biblical theme of fear, because I worry all the time, even though the Bible tells me not to. My constant worrying drives my husband insane. And him being driven insane makes me insane.

For example, he'll say, "You like worrying. If you didn't like it, you wouldn't do it so often."

To which I reply something mature and Christian like, “REALLY? I LIKE IT? DOES THIS LOOK LIKE A HAPPY FACE TO YOU?”

I think that one reason I worry so much is that some irrational part of me that does not pay enough attention to the Bible believes that if I worry about something, I can somehow prevent it from happening. But I have learned again and again and again that’s not true. At all.

What are you afraid of?

What do you worry about?

I worried about my parents constantly. That didn’t prevent them from dying. My worrying didn’t help. I worried that my mother’s falls would eventually kill her. They did. I worried that I would not make it to Phoenix on time when she was dying. I didn’t.

My worrying, my fear, did not change anything.

I miss my mom and I always will, but beautiful things also came after she died. My three siblings and I are closer than ever, and I’ve also been in touch with my stepsiblings, and there’s so much love there. There wouldn’t be so much pain if there wasn’t great love.

What are you afraid of?

What are your talents?

We’ve been talking about stewardship the past month. Stewardship isn’t only about money. It is about money. If you haven’t turned a pledge in yet, please do. Today would be great. But think about the talents in this parable in other ways.

Such as, your spiritual gifts.

You have gifts. What are you doing with them? Are you hoarding them, like the scared slave?

What are you afraid of?

I’m afraid of looking foolish. I’m afraid of things that I don’t do well.

My ukulele playing is not a talent. In fact, I completely lack musical gifts. Gary’s first wife was a musician, and when he and I were dating he told me that my total lack of musical ability was one of my most attractive qualities. I’ve embraced that.

But I have truly enjoyed, the past five years, that goofy little instrument.

Some of you know that I am dear friends with Jeunee Godsey at St. Michael’s. We took a ukulele class together for over a year. Jeunee, unlike me, is an extravert. She loves meeting new

people and talking to them. I love meeting new people here at church only. When I am not in church, I am anxious in social situations. At church, I know my role. I'm the priest. In other situations, I worry about what to say and how to act.

Jeunee convinced me to take this class, and then there was an opportunity for the class to play our little songs at a booth at the Folk Festival three years ago. Jeunee couldn't do it, so her bright idea was that *I* should do it. Me, who was only taking the class so that I could sit next to her and limit the conversation I would have to have with other people.

You are out of your mind, I told Jeunee. That sounds like a really fun thing for *you*. I don't like doing things that I don't do well, and I am certainly not going to make a fool of myself at a place where music lovers actually congregate. Are you insane?

Jeunee is skilled at encouragement, and I finally, reluctantly, agreed to do it. I practiced unceasingly. I was petrified. I made myself sick worrying. Then, I showed up and played, and it was one of the most fun things I have ever done. Not long after that, Jeunee and I started planning our first Uke-charist, and you all know that we've done six of them now and have our seventh on Epiphany. Each time, we raise money for important local causes. We get our churches together. We have a blast. Most important: we use our gifts to praise God.

Each time, I wonder why I am showing up for something that I'm not good at; but each time, I come home so grateful.

What are you afraid of? Your fear is not going to prevent bad things from happening, and your fear can get in the way of savoring good things.

There's a quote by Frederick Buechner that I love: "Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid." That sums it up, doesn't it? Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. Take some risks. Some of them won't pay off. Some of them will be failures. Do it anyway.

What are your talents? What are your gifts? What is God calling you to risk?