

This morning's Gospel portion from Matthew is most commonly known as Jesus' *Parable of the Five Talents*. The parable is the third of four stories in which Jesus tells his disciples about the "end of times," the day Jesus promises to come back as the world is ending to bring his people home. All four stories in Matthew follow the same format: each centers on the return of the master or bridegroom or king, the judgment that come with that return, and how those who await his return have lived their lives in the absence of the master or the bridegroom or the king. Appearing toward the very end of Jesus' public ministry, these four stories are of central and critical importance to Matthew's theology. Jesus is soon to die, and in the flurry of these last stories, he is attempting quickly to impart to his closest friends what is most important, and what is not important at all. In these four stories, Jesus demands their attention, wins their attention, with the use of illustrative stories and flamboyant characters, stark imagery, and sneaky plot twists. Pay attention, he is saying, I am using every trick in the book because what I am telling you is very, very important and you will need to remember it after I am gone.

In this morning's parable, Jesus tells the story of a master who entrusts the care of his resources to three slaves, or servants. To each the master gives a different sum of talents, in every case an enormous sum of money. To the first servant he gives five talents, to the second two, and to the third, one talent, each according to what the master thinks they can handle. He does not give directions but rather allows his servants the freedom to decide for themselves how they will use the talents while the master is away. Like the other three parables, the master returns and those that were left behind must account for the choices they have made and the life they have lived in his absence. The first two servants, of course, have acted with fidelity and responsibility and have used the master's resources to produce great and bigger things. The master responds enthusiastically, "well done, you the good and trustworthy." In addition to being put in charge of many things, they are invited, to "enter into the joy of your master." All is well. But the third guy, well, not so much. The third servant returns the talent he has buried to the master, no more and no less. Incensed, the master calls him "lazy" and "wicked," saying he will be cast out into the outer darkness with wailing and gnashing of teeth.

A conventional interpretation of Jesus' parable would treat this story as a comment on stewardship and goes something like this: talents, gifts, skills and resources are given to us by God and it is Jesus' imperative that we embrace the treasures we've been given and make something of them. We are not to hide our proverbial light under a proverbial bushel. If we do squander our gifts, God's judgment at the end of times will come crashing down on our heads and we will be very unhappy. But here's another take: maybe this parable isn't about stewardship or gifts or judgment at all. More and more I am learning not to trust my first impressions. In the Gospels, there is always something deeper and more complex going on, layers upon layers of meaning. First impressions are important, but never the whole story. No, I don't think Jesus is teaching his disciples

about the right use of gifts and leveling a threat of eternal damnation if they can't fit the bill. *This morning's story is about fear.*

What if we stepped back for a minute and reframed the parable? Maybe the crux of the story is not so much what the third servant *does* and the price he pays for his actions, but *why he does what he does*. We're told why. The servant hides his talent because, simply, he is afraid. He is afraid of disappointing the master, afraid of putting himself out there and taking a risk. He is afraid of losing what he can hold in his hands and protect, afraid of setting into motion what he cannot ultimately control. The servant is terrified and maybe Jesus' point here is that being cast out into the darkness is not what the master imposes, but rather, the kind of life the servant has already chosen for himself. The servant has allowed fear to take over and close him down, wall him in, clamp him up. He is so afraid to take a risk and put himself out there, that he is living a kind of misery of his own making. When we look at it this way, the emotion that this passage initially provokes in us – fear that our impending judgment includes the possibility that we too will be “thrown into the outer darkness” -- is the very emotion that Jesus calls us to resist. Jesus knows his disciples well, knows their frailties and how frightened they are. And in these “end of times” parables what he is saying to them is simply this: don't be afraid. Don't waste your life being afraid. When I come back for you, please do not let me find you living a kind of broken-down life pulled in on yourself.

“Do not be afraid.” “Do not be afraid.” Do you know that this is the single most repeated phrase in both the Hebrew Scripture and the Gospels? “Do not be afraid,” we are told over and over, “Do not be afraid, I your God am with you.” And once we know to look for it, the message literally jumps off every page of our scriptures.

My head is full of Advent this week, as our staff puts the finishing touches on this year's program and worship design for the season that begins two Sundays from today. I think you will be very pleased. To prepare, our staff team studied the upcoming Advent scriptures, and I was struck this year by the presence of Herod. You know Herod – the guy who shows up at the Christmas pageant and on the Feast of Epiphany. Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, larger-than-life ruler of all Galilee who controls the people with a steel boot, forcing them to register for the census so he can count their heads and track their movements. Herod Antipas, who is terrified of a little baby, thrown into a sweaty panic when the wise men arrive at court asking if he knows where the child is who has been born king of the Jews. Herod Antipas, who later becomes terrified of the powerful words and spiritual authority of John the Baptist, who imprisons John and ruthlessly kills him on the whim of his jealous wife. Throughout the Advent and Christmas scriptures, Herod is the cautionary tale, the icon of the kind of debilitating fear about which Jesus warns his disciples. What is ironic is that Herod enjoys wealth and pedigree, great power and the fear of his subjects. Herod can do whatever he wants and have whatever he wants. Yet, he spends most of his life driven by a fear so powerful and consuming that it directs everything he says and does. Despite the wealth and the expansive resources piled around him, all of the opportunity and possibility given him, Herod hands everything over to his fear, and in so doing, carves out a cold, dark cave of a life, a life entirely void of God.

And that's the problem with fear – it can chip away at our life and reduces it bit-by-bit to the sharp-edge, the dark room, the cold stone. One of the best novels ever written is the "Life of Pi," the story of a shipwrecked, young boy adrift on a lifeboat with a Bengal tiger. At the end of the story the boy is in hospital, struggling to recover from his ordeal. "I must say a word about fear," he tells his interviewer. "It is life's only true opponent. Only fear can defeat life. It is a clever, treacherous adversary, how well I know. It has no decency, respects no law or convention, shows no mercy. It goes for your weakest spot, which it finds with unnerving ease. It begins in your mind, always ... so you must fight hard to express it. You must fight hard to shine the light of words upon it. Because if you don't, if your fear becomes a wordless darkness that you avoid, perhaps even manage to forget, you open yourself to further attacks of fear because you never truly fought the opponent who defeated you."

When I was growing up, there was a point when my family hit with what was the first of a long series of very rough patches. My parents dragged us into family therapy where we were asked to see if we might improve how we were relating to each other in the midst of crisis. The therapist clued into the fact that many of our family problems were rooted in our individual fears. He used a tactic of helping us to "shine the light of words" upon those dark corners. I remember that after I said something that scared me he'd say, "Well if that happened, what would happen next?" I'd answer and then he's reply, "And then what would happen... and then what would happen...?" When I'd finally arrive at the end, which would usually be, "And then I would die," he would say, "And then what would happen?" "I guess," I replied, "I guess then I would be with God." It was a highly effective therapeutic tool, and it took a great deal of fear's power away, a weakened opponent not so capable of defeating our family. And even 35 years later, when I am feeling especially anxious or frightened, I tend to walk myself through that same drill. And it reminds me, each and every time, that *God is waiting patiently for me on the other side of my worst fears.*

As in all things, Jesus did not come to condemn or criticize, judge or frighten his disciples. He came to give them, and all of us – you and me and all of humanity -- life. Big life. Happy life. Meaningful, purposeful life. Maybe the key is to try to learn how to live more out of trust in God and less out of fear. Don't get me wrong, we have every reason to feel afraid from time to time. But I think what Jesus is cautioning is when fear takes over and rules the day, when it consumes us and directs all of our relationships and choices. Jesus is telling us to get out off the sidelines and get out onto the field. Telling us to love with passion and to be always willing, as we sometimes say in church, to risk something big for something good. Maybe what is required is what Eleanor Roosevelt once suggested: "Do one thing every single day that scares you." Whatever it looks like, we choose. We can spend our whole lives worrying and fearful, or we can unlock our hearts and strike out into life with some bravado, keeping our eyes focused on God's repeated promises, trusting that ultimately, we will be alright. Amen.