

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST  
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON  
“A HEART FOR THOSE IN NEED”  
Matthew 25:14-30  
November 16, 2008  
8:45 AM Service**

We are, for the most part, a nation of cautious people. You can see it in our politics, in our finances, and in most cases in how we live our lives.

There is a time for risk and there is a time for caution. Too many people take incredibly stupid risks. But there are many more people who live life too cautiously.

This parable of the cautious servant reminds us of how many people are cheated out of life by their own fears. Afraid to risk anything, these people gain nothing. They deprive themselves of love for fear of being hurt. They muddle along in mediocrity for fear of failure. They live behind bars made of their own fears.

Fear can be a good thing. Fear is the alarm system of life. Fear tells us to run from a dangerous situation. Fear tells us to check out a persistent medical symptom. But fear can be the enemy of life. Fear of failure may immobilize us when opportunity knocks. Fear of imagined ills can deprive us of happiness. The latter kind of fear is a bad thing, robbing us of joy and hope.

The Gospel of Matthew, more than Mark, Luke and John, collects the stories of Jesus that warn of coming judgment. The Gospel we read for today is one such example. This parable is called the ***“Parable of the Talents”***. It is the second of three parables gathered by Matthew in this chapter. According to Matthew, this chapter represents the final sermon Jesus preached to the public. After this chapter, Jesus spends his teaching time in private with the disciples. So this is the last word for the masses that

followed Jesus. This is his last sermon to them. And what is it that Jesus preaches? What is his final sermon? It is a sermon of three parables, all of which point to the need for awareness and diligence in the face of an absentee, but retuning Master.

In each parable the persons in the story are given the opportunity to serve the Master, who is temporarily away, and who trusts them to serve in his absence. The bridesmaids that we read about in the Gospel last week were suppose to usher the groom when he arrived. The servants in our lesson for today were suppose to invest the master's money wisely. And the people at the judgment, from the lectionary text for next week, were suppose to take care of the least powerful in society. In each story, some fail and some succeed in the assigned task. In each story, those who fail are left knocking on a locked door stripped of their possessions, or thrown out into the darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Now you might agree, these are tough measures for failure in this final sermon of Jesus. But Matthew wants to awaken a church that has fallen into apathy. Such was the case with the church of the second century. They have forgotten that there is something at stake in the fight for the Kingdom. Matthew wants his church to remember that Jesus thinks it matters how Christians conduct themselves in the world.

When you read Matthew's judgment stories you learn that the outer darkness is reserved for those who refuse to forgive their neighbor, for those who do not take care of little ones, for those who live unaware of their purpose in life. But this parable today issues harsh judgment for a most puzzling offense; the man punished by the master said simply, "***I was afraid.***" This baffles me because we are all afraid sometimes. In fact, sometimes it is a virtue to be afraid.

When we were children we were taught to fear things that would hurt us. A child does not know that a hot stove is dangerous, or a coiled snake, or a busy street, unless a parent teaches that child to be afraid. All of us have survived to this day because someone loved us enough to teach us fear. So, why is the man in the parable condemned because of his fear? Beyond this, sometimes fear is a form of pleasure.

How could this man be so severely punished because of fear? Isn't fear one of our favorite emotions? When we are babies, adults make strange

faces at us, and surprise us with a sudden outburst of “**Boo!**” And we laugh in delight. When we are toddlers, the baby-sitter chases us around the house with the mock threat and the twinkle in her eye, saying, “**I’m going to get you. I’m going to get you.**” And we squeal in delight.

When we are ten years old, we go to the county fair with our best friend. There we ride the monster roller coaster that turns our stomachs and frightens us out of our wits. As we stagger off the roller coaster after the ride, we turn to our ashen-faced friend and say, “**I was scared to death! Let’s ride it again!**” And we run to ride again, giggling with delight.

When we are teenagers we rent scary movies and tie ourselves to bungee chords. We love to have a little fear, don’t we? And even adults will go white water rafting, pay \$1,000 to ride in a jet fighter aircraft, or learn the craft of parachuting. Why? Fear is one of our oldest and favorite forms of pleasure. So, why is the man in the parable condemned because of his fear?

Fear can become the epitaph of one’s life. This is the case with the man in the parable. His master gave him an important responsibility, to invest and manage a huge sum of money. A talent was a unit of money equal to 15 years of a man’s wage. This was a great trust placed in the servant by the master. But his response was only to think of all the things that might go wrong. He missed every opportunity to expand his life, to live fully into the moment of trust given by the master. In the end, it is not enough to hand back what was given without loss.

You know this man. You have seen him many times. It is his spirit of fear that resides in the boy who will not try-out for the team because he is afraid he might not make the team. This fear lurks in the shadows of the girl who cheats on the exam for fear that she would fail on her own. Fear guides the tongue of the one who lies, fearing the consequences of the truth. And it is fear that shuts the mouth of Christian witness, withdraws the hand of Christian mercy, and intimidates the heart of Christian justice.

“***I was afraid....***,” the man said. And that fear made all the difference between a life lived with risk and joy and contribution, and a life wasted and buried. God have mercy on the person, the nation, or even the church whose opportunities are squandered by excessive fear. You had to overcome fear in order to have this church. There may have been some who were afraid to embrace the debt. The man said “***I was afraid....***”

Several years ago, when the AIDS illness was new, a young man lay dying in a hospital of the disease. His parents called their pastor to come pray with their son before he died. The pastor came to the hospital room and stopped at the door, but wouldn't go in. He shouted in a prayer from the hall outside and ran away as fast as he could. And why not? No one knew how AIDS was transmitted at that time. The pastor was afraid. Wouldn't you be? But the family was not comforted by this fleet-footed last rite. So they started calling pastors out of the yellow pages. They wanted a minister, anyone, who would help their boy die surrounded by his faith. Finally they found a minister who agreed to come see them. He entered the room, drew a deep sign, swallowed hard, and proceeded across the hospital room toward the boy and his family. The minister drew near to the patient, cradled the boy's head in the crook of his arm, and sang to him the hymns of the church, and prayed with him until he died.

Afterwards the media caught up to the minister and asked him, **“Why did you do it? Weren't you afraid?”** To which the minister replied, **“Yes, I was afraid. But I did it because it seemed to me that it is what Jesus would have done.”** What would Jesus have you to do? Everyone fears. But not everyone runs.

Some people are afraid and confused about the future of our country. Not sure about which direction we are going to take. Well, each year I watch an amazing sight out of my office window. In the month of October, the pumpkins arrive. And not very long after, the squirrels arrive scampering among the trees. I believe every squirrel in Park Hill knows where our church is. Now I watch the squirrels jump from one high tree to another. But what fascinates me is watching them with their heads inside of the pumpkins while their tails are moving with excitement. Of course, they are afraid of anyone who walks by. But they come down from the trees and bore their way completely inside of the pumpkins. And once inside they seem as safe and unconcerned as they were in the trees. When I walk out into the yard, they appear irritated with my presence, but it doesn't deter them from their goal. I've even seen the children run the squirrels, but not a one has been caught. I guess they are willing to risk plenty for the sumptuous meal of the Park Hill pumpkins. Many people are ruled by their fears and don't make good decisions. Do you have less nerve than the squirrels?

Shakespeare wrote: **“Cowards die many times before their deaths; the valiant never taste of death but once.”** But where do we find that kind of bravery? Some seek that courage in the thrill of drugs or the dare of danger. Others in their line of work or in the call of duty. But the only source for a life beyond fear is faith in that one who said: ***“Fear not, for I am with you, even to the ends of the world!”***

***“Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!”*** Come grow your faith with us here at Park Hill. I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.