

**Sermon – Matthew 25.14-30, P28, YA, November 19, 2017**

**By The Rev. Jennifer Andrews-Weckerly**

**Hickory Neck Episcopal Church, Toano, VA**

Our parable from Matthew’s gospel today seems to present two very different versions of God. When the story opens, the landowner is painted in a positive light. Within the first line of this parable, we already find a landowner who places a great deal of trust in his servants. Not only does he trust his servants with his property, he is also thoughtful about what each servant can handle. Based on their abilities, he give gives one servant five talents, one servant two talents, and the other servant one talent.[\[i\]](#) Now before we go too much farther, we need to remember that the entrusting of even one talent is a big deal. You see, a talent is worth about 15 years of what a servant would normally make in wages.[\[ii\]](#) To the first servant, the landowner is entrusting about 75 years’ worth of wages! This landowner is not only generous with his property, he communicates a great deal of confidence in these three servants.

The story continues to be remarkable. Nowhere in the parable does the landowner say, “Okay here are your talents. Here is how I suggest you manage my wealth.” No, the landowner leaves, communicating not just generosity, confidence, and trust, but also giving the gift of freedom to each servant. Implicit is the expectation that they handle the

wealth well, but also implicit is the idea that they have some autonomy in their management.

Many years later, the landowner returns, and we find his generous, trusting, encouraging nature continues. When the first servant tells the landowner of his adventures with the talents, how he is able to double his holdings, the landowner is effusive with praise. Because he has done such a fantastic job, the landowner says he will reward him with entrusting him to do more. And then, as if to further prove what a generous landowner he is, the landowner opens his arms widely and says, “enter into the joy of your master.” What a tremendous gift to this servant who has worked hard, taken on tremendous risk, and hustled for years and years for the sake of his landowner. We can almost hear the vigorous pats on the back, and imagine the tears welling up in the servant’s eyes as he is affirmed, encouraged, and loved.

But then our story changes. The third servant seems to evoke a very different version of the landowner. Clearly the landowner knew the third servant was not as gifted as the others when he only gave the third servant one talent. Faced with the sudden burden of wealth like he has never seen before, the third servant panics. He does not want to mess things up or disappoint the landowner. Unlike the other servants, this servant is full of self-doubt and fear. And so, he does the best he can. He goes and he buries the money. Sure, he does not come back with more like the other servants, but at least he

does not come back with less than with what he was entrusted. To this nervous, timid, perhaps slightly less bright servant, the landowner is suddenly a very different landowner. The landowner calls the servant wicked and lazy. The landowner yells at the servant for mischaracterizing the landowner and for being so overcome with fear. And then, as if the yelling and name-calling is not enough, the landowner strips him of the wealth, gives the talent to the first servant, and then casts the third servant out of his grace and abundance, leaving him in the outer darkness.

So, why is this landowner so kind, generous, and trusting in one breath, and impatient, mean, and cruel in the next? We have been getting a lot of these kinds of stories from Matthew lately. First, we got the wedding host who seemed to be generously welcoming all to the party, only to cast someone out who wore the wrong clothing. Then we got the feuding bridesmaids who refuse to care for one another, and the bridegroom who has no patience for a lack of preparedness. And then we get today's parable. If we simply had just this one instance of God's harshness or unjust judgment, we could say the parable is an anomaly, a strange outlier. But given the repeated telling of scary-ending stories, we are cued into the idea that something else is going on in Matthew's gospel. Indeed, all of these unsettling parables are what we call eschatological parables – stories about the end times.<sup>[iii]</sup> At this point in Matthew's gospel, Jesus is approaching the end of his life. Instead of continuing to heal, preach, and lovingly teach his disciples, he starts getting real. I am reminded of one of the first reality television shows that ever aired,

MTV's *The Real World*. MTV would pair seven very different individuals and make them live together for a few months. The tagline of the show was, "This is what happens when people stop being polite and start getting real."

Understanding that Jesus is facing his immanent death is critical to understanding what is going on with Jesus in these parables. Any of us who has journeyed with someone who is dying knows that at some point, they stop being polite and start getting real. This is their last chance to tell others the essentials: the life lessons learned, the love they want to share, and the stern encouragement they want to give. Although this landowner seems harsh or even irrationally mean, what he is doing is communicating ultimate significance.

Let's go back to this third servant. We know what the third servant does is not all that bad. He does not squander the entrusted wealth, or act rashly. He is conservatively prudent and, perhaps based on his skill level, wise to restrain himself. But ultimately, the landowner is not upset about what the servant does. The landowner is upset about the servant's motivation: fear.[\[iv\]](#)

In a couple of months, our family will be going on a trip that involves a visit to an amusement park. We have been talking about the park as a family, and most of the members of our family are thrilled. We have been watching videos about the rides, and the children are getting amped up to try some of the rollercoasters. I, on the other hand, have no interest in the rides. I am scared to death of rollercoasters. I do not like the way

they make me feel, I do not like how tense they make me, and I do not like the lack of control I feel when on them. I gladly prefer to be the “holder of bags” at amusement parks. But my family has been riding me this time. They want to experience the adventure with me. They want to discover which ones are too scary and which ones are just plain fun together. And yet just talking about that idea has my knees knocking with fear.

That’s the funny thing about fear. Fear distorts every good thing about our nature. Fear cuts off creativity. When we are overcome with fear, we cannot be imaginative and playful, coming to new solutions and ways of being. Fear also messes with our sense of trust. When we are overcome with fear, we forget the goodness of others, our previous examples of how things have gone well, or even the bold support of our God. Fear messes with our confidence. When we are overcome with fear, all the good, powerful, and holy parts of us gets riddled with self-doubt and inaction. And finally, fear messes with our willingness to take risks. When we are overcome with fear, we cannot do the things that will lead to great payoff.

Fear in the abstract is a normal reaction in life. But we have to remember what Jesus is talking about in this parable to understand why the landowner is so harsh about fear. You see, talents are not just metaphors for the things we are good at or even for the money we have in life. Talents are metaphors for the vocations we each have.[\[v\]](#) You

see, each person in this room has a calling. Some of us are called to particular jobs or courses of study. Some of us are called to particular roles within families or groups. Some of us are called to use our gifts in particular ways. We all have a call, a vocation in life. And our vocation is affirmed by the skills or materials we are given to live out that call. The problem with the third servant is that he is given what he needs in abundance. The landowner affirms him, trusts him, and gives him space and time to live out his vocation. But the third servant allows himself to be so overcome with fear that he does not live out his vocation. He shuts down creativity, trust, confidence, and risk-taking all because he is afraid. And that is the ultimate sin for God.

What this parable invites us to do today is not to see this landowner – this stand-in for God – as a mean, cruel, reactive God that punishes. Quite the opposite, the parable today invites us to remember that our God is trusting, discerning about our gifts, confident in our abilities, and joyful in our obedience. God gives each person in this room a vocation, a purpose, in this world, gives us the gifts and encouragement we need to fulfill that vocation, and, ultimately, expects us to go out into the world and boldly take the risk of doing what God has already enabled us to do. No one likes being thrust out of the nest, having to use our wings to sustain us. But our parable reminds us we can do what we need to do. We have beautiful wings and our flying will help others, will bring blessing to the world, and will bring us great joy. Getting scared when God stops being polite and starts getting real is normal. But letting fear overpower our beauty is not what God

desires for us – because God knows you can do it. God knows your willingness to live out your vocation means great things for the world. You can do it! So buckle up and get ready for the ride! Amen.

[i] Mark Douglas, “Theological Perspective,” *Feasting on the Word*, Yr. A, Vol. 4 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 310.

[ii] Lindsay P. Armstrong, “Homiletical Perspective,” *Feasting on the Word*, Yr. A, Vol. 4 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 309, 311.

[iii] Douglas, 308

[iv] Douglas, 312.

[v] Idea presented by Matthew Skinner in the podcast, “SB570 – Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost (Ord. 33)” November 11, 2017, as found at [http://www.workingpreacher.org/brainwave.aspx?podcast\\_id=948](http://www.workingpreacher.org/brainwave.aspx?podcast_id=948) on November 17, 2017.