

Sermon for Sunday, September 19, 1976, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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WHEN FEAR SCARES YOU
St. Matthew 25:14-30

Text: "...so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours." St. Matthew 25:25

Our scripture for this morning tells a parable by Jesus that comes later in his ministry. His career on earth is fast drawing to a close and he has begun to tell his disciples about the end-times, about the return of the Lord, about the judgment at the end. Actually, the passage this morning falls between two very memorable passages. It is preceded by the story of the ten virgins, five wise and five foolish. And the point of that story is to warn us that the end will come unexpectedly and we should be ready for that. It is followed by his story about the day of judgment when the sheep will be separated from the goats. In that story the sheep are welcomed into God's kingdom with the words, "for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me..." So our parable for this morning is a judgment parable. Perhaps you never realized that before. But Jesus is warning us that we are going to be judged by God in terms of how we have used the resources of life that he gives us.

I want you to notice that the servant who received one talent and refused to put it to use was judged by his master. He was cast out as a worthless servant into outer darkness where men weep and gnash their teeth. What was his sin--what was his failure? It wasn't that he had qualified to be entrusted with only one talent; no, it was that he refused to use what he did have. And I think we need to recognize that his sin was not in the number of talents he had. It could have been told of the five talent man had he failed to make use of that entrusted to him. I know some five talent people who are functioning at the one talent level. And I suspect they will have more to answer for than the one talent man.

But the question I want to deal with this morning is not the fact that he failed to use his talent. It would be most difficult to improve on the way it is told. No, I would like to deal with the reason why he failed to use what he had. I would like for us to think together about the problem facing the one talent man that kept him from making use of what he had. When we do that, I suspect we will find something very relevant to all of us.

I think the clue to the failure of the one talent man is found in our text for this morning. There we read, "...so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground..." Behind the failure of the one talent man is fear. If you have never been afraid, you can't identify with the one talent man. But the rest of us here this morning can! We know what it is like to be afraid. To feel our hearts pounding in our chests, to have our throat dry and paralyzed, to have our palms cold and clammy. Yes, fear is something all of us can identify with.

Notice in the first place that the one talent man was afraid of his own ability. Quite frankly he confesses to his master that he was a coward. "I was afraid," he says, "and I hid your talent." Can you imagine how he must have felt when his master put that large sum of money in his hand? He looked at it and sweat broke out on his forehead. He closed his hand into a tight fist and clutched it to his breast. You can imagine the thoughts that raced through his head, "what if I lose

it; what if I do the wrong thing; what if I'm not able to return it to my master." Yes, he was afraid of his own ability and in his fear he went out to some secret place, dug a hole, and hid the money.

Do you know how he felt? Have you ever been asked to do something and fear suddenly grabbed your heart? Have you been asked to make a speech and suddenly realized you had nothing to say? Have you ever been asked to make a few remarks before a crowd and your throat wouldn't work? Have you been asked to do some job and suddenly down in your heart you know you can't do it? Have you ever been faced with some responsibility and all at once you are overwhelmed by the knowledge that it is too big for you?

Well, I can certainly identify with that! I can imagine myself in the place of that one talent servant, looking at that piece of money in my hand, and feeling the fear wash over me because in my heart I'm afraid of myself, my own abilities. I suspect most of us know what it is to feel a sudden shyness, an embarrassment, because in some situation we suddenly began to doubt ourselves and our own abilities.

But notice in the second place that the one talent man was also afraid of others. Listen to what he says to his master: "Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not winnow; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground..." To a large measure, his response was determined by his fear of another. What he did, how he acted was largely determined by how someone else would act or respond.

Do you have the same problem? I know I do. So often what we do is determined by what other people will think or say or do or act. Yes, we are so often governed by how we think other people will respond to us. Are you afraid of other people? Most of us are. The clothes we wear, the things we do, the kind of car we drive, the part of town we live in, the clubs we belong to are often determined by our fear of what others will think of us. Not many of us are free this morning to be ourselves--to do and say and act in ways that are in our hearts. And the reason is because of our fear of others. How much is your life determined this morning by what other people will say or think or feel? Quite a bit, isn't it?

But go on to notice in the third place that our one talent man was also fearful of the uncertainties of life. The first two servants in the parable took the money entrusted to them and began to trade with it. In a relatively short period of time each of them had doubled his money. But not the third man! He feared a sudden drop in the market; he feared an unwise investment; he feared a shift in business or a drop in demand or a foolish expenditure. Yes, life was far too uncertain. He could not trust life and the world he lived in. The safest thing to do was simply to bury his money in the ground and there it would be safe.

Have you ever been paralyzed by that kind of fear?...the fear of what might happen? The fear of the unknown, the fear of "if"? In one of his books, Dr. Henry Link tells of a letter he received from a young woman. She wrote, "ever since I was 16 years old I have been afraid to converse in a strange group." And then she enumerates other fears--fear of losing her job, fear of driving her car, fear of making a report to a girls' club. She was so obsessed with her fear of the uncertainties of life that her chances for happiness were slim indeed. And, to greater or lesser degree, all of us have experienced such fears of life.

Well, the question is, what are we going to do about our fears? How are we going to handle our anxieties? For example, how do you handle fears about your own abilities? I think St. Paul gives us a clue at this point. St. Paul said, "I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me." In effect, he said to put your trust in Jesus. That sounds almost too pious or too pat. Yet, that is exactly how a Christian overcomes his fear about his own abilities--he puts his trust in Jesus. Karle Baker has written a little poem that goes like this:

Courage is armor
A blind man wears;
The calloused scar
Of outlived despairs
Courage is Fear
That has said its prayers.

I like that! "Courage is fear that has said its prayers." And for the man who begins to lose confidence in his own ability, let him trust in Jesus and like St. Paul he will discover that he can do all things through Jesus who strengthens him.

And how do you handle your fears about others--your fear of what they will say or what they will do? Maybe you never realized it before, but a Christian is somebody who knows he is loved and cared for. He knows that God loves him, forgives him, accepts him. And that frees a man to be himself. He doesn't need to be thinking about how other people respond to him--he is already loved, he is already accepted. And once that happens--once a man is free because he is already loved--then he can reach out to others. Patricia Brennan tells the story of how she, while trying to raise her son alone, discovered that her boy was in jail. He had been involved in drugs and a hold-up. She couldn't believe it. She went to see him and she was filled with bitterness. She had worked so hard and given him the best and tried to do everything right, but he had failed. She waited for her name to be called, though, to go and sit at the glass partition and talk to her boy by telephone. Another mother there began to talk to her about her son who was also in prison. The mother said, "I just can't wait to see him and tell him it's okay. The family at home, all of us, we're ready to help any way we can. Isn't that what families are for?" And as she talked a stunning realization swept over Patricia Brennan. She was concerned for herself--not Michael. She had been thinking of "my feelings, my pride, my precious reputation. It was Michael who was in jail and he was the one who needed love and support." And then she heard the other mother say, "It's easy to love our kids when they're winning the prizes, but the time they need our love most is when they've made a mistake." Do you begin to see? When you are secure within--when you know you are loved and cared for--then you are free to reach out to others, you are free to respond to the kinds of needs that others may have.

And how do you handle your uncertainties and fears about life: Well you see, once you put your trust in Jesus--once you put your confidence in him--you can never be afraid of life again. And why? Because you can never believe again that life is fickle fate or chance or fortune. No, once you trust in Jesus, you know that all things are working together for good for them that love him. You know that his mercy and compassion surrounds you and whatever life brings you, God is at work in it to make it turn out for good. And once you believe that; you see, life can never threaten you again. Does that make sense to you? You see, when you look at the cross of Jesus and see how much God loves you, how much sorrow he bore to redeem you, you know that he will never let you go and you can't be afraid. Yes, we carry fear into life--fear of our own abilities, fear of others, fear of life's uncertainties, but when you put your hand in the hand of Jesus and trust him you need never be afraid again.