

PROPER 28, PENTECOST 24, YEAR A, NOVEMBER 15,2020

Franklin Roosevelt once famously said, “We have nothing to fear but fear itself.” Truth is there are a lot of things we fear. There is Claustrophobia, Astraphobia, Agoraphobia, Acrophobia , Arachnophobia and many many more. Certainly we all have fears about Covid 19 and I’m sure some of you have one or more of those fears I mentioned.

I suffer from Acrophobia – the fear of heights. I didn’t always as I used to work on the 32nd floor of the Exxon building across from Rockefeller Center in New York City. But I do now so it was quite interesting travelling around the country especially going through the Rockies and many of the National Parks because sheer drops and I do not get along. Some examples: We were driving over the hogsback section of Scenic highway 12 which is a two lane highway with very little shoulder, sheer drops on both sides and hair pin turns and we’re pulling a 45 ft long RV. So my way of dealing with it was to hang on to the door with one hand and cover my eyes with the other. Another nerve wracking time was being on the back of the motorcycle and going up the hair pin turns with no guardrails in Glacier National Park.

However, there are other things we fear that are not as physically gut wrenching; such as growing older, not being able to do the things we once did, lack of money, loss of memory, loss of independence and loss of personal dignity, fear of what others think of you or fear of God and an assumption of God’s judgement to name just a few.

Now in today’s gospel lesson we are told that the three slaves feared their master who was a hard task master and terrified of his anger. Again, just like last week I’m going to turn this parable on it’s head. Traditionally this parable is interpreted that God is the master and that we shouldn’t waste our talents, our gifts, our money or God will be angry with us and, in the end, if we do waste our talents we will get our just deserts. We will be thrown out of the kingdom by an angry God. So, we’re told the first two slaves are the ones that we should emulate while we should never be the third slave who is seen as lazy and unprofitable. On the surface this seems like a good interpretation of the parable as it confirms our belief that if we work hard, do the right things, don’t waste our gifts, acknowledge our blessings from God we will be rewarded. Again, this parable doesn’t correlate with Jesus’ other parables which emphasize compassion, acceptance and love of God.

In this parable it seems that we have a very angry and demanding God who doesn’t tolerate much not even cautiousness. I think to better understand the meaning and significance of what was written, we need to understand the cultural background of the people who wrote and originally heard it.

We live in a materialistically-driven culture, governed by the accumulation of stuff and greed. The Bible was written during an honor culture, where stuff and money didn’t matter. In an honor-shame culture, people want honor. Money is not an end, but a means to an end. In other words, money and wealth is one way to gain more honor. Someone might be insanely rich, but if they had no honor, they were not well-liked or respected.

Furthermore, honor-shame cultures typically believe that wealth and possessions are in limited supply. So, if one person gained wealth, it was only at the expense of someone else. You accumulated wealth by taking it from someone. The rich get richer at the expense of the poor, which, in an honor-shame culture, was an extremely shameful

way to live. This is one reason why honor-shame cultures had so many "Patrons." As the rich accumulated wealth, they saw it as their duty and responsibility to give this wealth back to society in the form of music, arts, schools, hospitals, and other such humanitarian works. This way, the wealthy gained greater honor, but not necessarily greater wealth.

So I think we need to re-read the Parable of the Talents through this cultural lens. In our culture, we think the heroes are the servants who doubled their money because they worked hard at doing it. But in an honor-based culture, the people who double their money are the villains because the only way they were able to get more money was by taking it from someone else. It says they traded their talents to double their money. This is where it gets tricky. They probably loaned out their money and charged high interest rates in order to double their money that quickly. This was considered usury or extortion and charging any interest was strictly forbidden in Jewish law. Yet the master in this story praises them. He is praising their deceitful ways which can only mean he is involved in unjust business dealings himself. The money is given back to the unscrupulous master which makes him richer and others poorer.

Now the hero of the story in this different interpretation is the third servant, who did not become richer, but instead was content with what he was given. He chose not to collect on the backs of others. He chose, by burying his talent, not to be coerced into conforming and doing something he knew was wrong. He refused to be complicit in the exploitation carried out by his master. This slave feared his master and what he might do to him but his fear of not doing what was right was greater. He held on to his values and ethical standards.

Obviously, in this alternate way of reading the Parable of the Talents, the master cannot represent God because he's so reprehensible and is in total opposition to the kingdom of God.

Jesus is telling us we are to live according to His new code of honor. It's not about going out and making money dishonestly and off the backs of the poor but standing up for the poor and disenfranchised and keeping one's honor even when we are afraid. Remember, the kingdom of God that Jesus preached about lifts up the fallen; it seeks out the lost; it accepts the unacceptable. The kingdom of God is a reversal of the way things are.

I believe this parable is also teaching us about being true to God's kingdom by risking oneself to do what is right and that can be very frightening and unnerving. Let me tell you a story.

During World War II there was a Protestant minister and his wife who lived in a tiny mountain village. Along with their fellow townsfolk, they provided refuge and, when possible, escape for Jews and others fleeing Nazi persecution. Although they were all under surveillance, they quietly continued their efforts throughout the war. Ultimately, the personal risk they took saved the lives of more than thirty five hundred Jews, most of whom were children, as well as fifteen hundred others fleeing persecution.

Years later, the wife was interviewed by those who found it hard to fathom such courage, such risk. She said this about her choices: "Remember that in your life there will be lots of circumstances where you will need a kind of courage, a kind of decision on your own, not about other people but about yourself." [\[iii\]](#)

She insists the rescue operation in that village was not only about the people they were trying to save. It was also about the rescuers themselves. They each had a decision

to make. Who would they be? Would they be passive, cautious, self-protective, fearful? Or would they be messengers of Christ's compassion and love - no matter the risk? The villagers chose the risk. As the minister's wife concluded, what more is there?

I think that a lot of us have been led to think that faithfulness and being a good Christian simply amounts to avoiding what is immoral or sinful, working hard at all costs to get ahead so God will be pleased with us, and heeding all the prohibitions and negative rules like "Don't do this," "Don't do that." But when you think a bit about Jesus' teachings, there isn't much said about what not to do. Instead, Jesus has a great deal to say about what must be done in his name: Take my yoke. Follow me. Ask, seek, knock. Feed my sheep. Watch and pray. Let your light shine. Love one another.

Success is not found in accumulating more than we can ever use, but in our willingness to risk what we have in response to God's invitation. In the end I don't think "The Parable of the Talents" is really about money or abilities. It's a story about trust, a story about risk, a story about being faithful to Jesus' call to us no matter how fearful we might think the outcome will be. It is a story about the way one lives toward God which is a life of generosity that does not seek a return, which is a life that offers hospitality to strangers, generosity to the poor, and care for the sick that are done without expectation of return. The central question about life is not "What did we accomplish?" but whether we learned to love and that is always the path to God. Amen.