

Despite the fact that all four Gospels are identified by their supposed author, most Biblical scholars feel it is unlikely that any of them was actually written by a single individual. Much more likely, since they actually sprang up some 30 to 50 years after Jesus was no longer with them, they are the product of many individuals, recording the memories of certain communities as they recalled the sayings and doings of Jesus that had been doubtless talked of for a generation or more.

Given this sort of joint effort, I can easily imagine the community that recorded today's so-called "Parable of the Talents" getting together on a Sunday morning, recounting the parable itself, and then discussing amongst themselves what its meaning was. One well-meaning person said "Well, do you notice in this story that, to those that had much, more was given, and to those who had little, even what they had was taken away? This must be the meaning of the parable." And thus it was recorded by the scribe appointed that day to take the minutes.

Many is the instance where I disagree entirely with the recorded meaning of a parable. The early disciples remembered the parable itself well enough, but completely got the wrong end of the stick when interpreting its meaning. I therefore have no trouble believing that most, if not all, of the parables related in the four Gospels probably actually emanated from Jesus' mouth close to the form in which we find them recorded. But the meaning that gets supplied – even though attributed to Jesus in the verbiage of the Gospels – simply strikes me as not on target; even, very possibly, completely wrong; and almost certainly not from Jesus himself.

Today's Gospel passage is one such example. To me, it has *nothing* to do with how much each of the servants was given, but what they *did* with what they were given. It is clear that, had the person given five talents simply buried it, and the one given only one talent invested it, the one given more would have been found wanting. So it is therefore *NOT* a story about abundance and scarcity, nor even

about the superiority of investing over saving. It strikes me that it is the attitude of the servants, and their resulting actions, that is the point.

And, personally, I don't find it compelling to argue that the two servants who took risks – one might even say dangerous liberties with money that was not their own – are actually being praised by Jesus for their market savvy. I also don't see the actions of the master as conveying any particular message of wisdom.

Rather, I think the point of this story – and the figure to whom the most attention is paid, the third servant – is about the destructive power of fear. The third servant says, “Master, I knew you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was *AFRAID*, and I went and hid your talent in the ground.”

It is this servant's fear, and his paralysis due to his anxiety, that comes under scrutiny here.

In a sermon I gave a little over a year ago, I mentioned that the second most frequently mentioned divine admonition in the Bible – let us call it a “scriptural imperative” – is to “Sing to the Lord,” with sixty-some occurrences. That sermon was about the importance of singing and song to our worship and our communal identity. The first most frequently mentioned divine admonition, however, is “Fear not.” I think this parable falls squarely into that category.

And, as I have reflected on the state of our nation in this unsettling post-election period, one thing that strikes me is the prevalence of fear. Some fear change; some fear loss of power. Some fear the disappearance of long-held norms; others fear that long-held norms are not changing quickly enough. Some fear that failure to change our behavior – such as our treatment of the environment – will result in catastrophic consequences; others fear that too far-reaching changes of behavior

will result in unnecessary hardship and poverty. Some fear that admitting to deep-seated injustices in our society will invalidate everything good that has gone before; others fear that failure to acknowledge such injustices will doom us as a failed and immoral society. Some fear overly restrictive laws, or laws applied unequally to all; others fear lawlessness. Some fear judicial activism; others fear justice failing to adapt to reality. Some fear losing their lives to Covid; others fear losing their liberties. Some fear godlessness; others fear religious bigotry. Some fear riots; others fear silence. Some fear protests; others fear the police. And everyone . . . *everyone* . . . fears the future, fears national demise, fears loss of security, fears loss of control.

But what is the opposite of fear? I would argue that it is not confidence, and certainly not blind trust. In fact, in this instance, perhaps it is not helpful to ponder what the *opposite* of fear is, but what its *antidote* is, its remedy, its treatment. How do we as a nation, and as individuals, extricate ourselves from this spiral of fear?

I believe that the most effective antidote is ***gratitude***. For gratitude comes out of deep self-examination and awareness. Gratitude is an assessment of where things stand, recognition that things could be worse, and acknowledgement of blessing. It is a refocusing from what *could* go wrong, to what *has* gone right. It is a complicated and sometimes difficult act of extracting oneself from the mire of self-pity, revulsion, and dis-ease that is the facile product of our worst fears. It is a willful re-directing of our attention towards the good in our lives; towards those places where God has blessed us, rather than those places where humankind has disappointed us. It is a conscious resolution to build positive intentions through recognition of blessing and beauty and goodness that is already present. It must be worked at, in many cases, rather than coming naturally.

And there is no more appropriate time of year for creating a discipline of gratitude than November, containing a national holiday specifically and wholly devoted to it.

So I will close with one example of my gratitude on this day, and encourage you to consciously develop a discipline of gratitude, even – especially – in this unsettling time. Start a gratitude journal, or train yourself to say “Thank you” with authenticity every time it comes out of your mouth, or write a thank you note this week to someone who has blessed you at some point during the pandemic. Here’s my story:

I was a senior in college when I purchased a CD recording called “My soul doth magnify the Lord,” sung by the choir of St. Paul’s Cathedral, London, containing six settings of the Magnificat and Nunc dimittis by six different composers – none of whom I had ever heard of, though I was a student of music history. The first two tracks on this disk were the Magnificat and Nunc dimittis in C by Charles V. Stanford that we just heard moments ago. When I played the disk for the first time, I recall being instantly transfixed by the opening chords of that Magnificat, and thrilled by the Gloria Patri. Although I did not recognize it at the moment, it was a conversion for me – an emotionally super-charged experience that would define the rest of my life. It would soon see me singing in an Episcopal church, would propel me to graduate study in England focused on this very music, and would eventually lead to my being your Choirmaster here at St. Andrew’s. It is one of the reasons I programmed what is affectionally known in the biz as “Stanford in C” on this Sunday when I was preaching, and attempting to adopt my own practice of gratitude.

So, in light of this, I am thankful today for this place, this church, this organist, these – and many other – singers. For the role that this community has played in my life, where the rector, the leadership, and the people value the beauty and blessing of music as the handmaiden of the liturgy, enhancing and adorning our worship, and thereby affirming and developing my calling as an Anglican musician. Thank you Ralph; thank you Elizabeth; thank you to all the singers, most of whom are currently unable to join us here. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. And . . . *Thanks be to God.*