



FROM THE PULPIT

North Shore Congregational Church

“Driven by...?”

Rev. Dr. Martin W. Hall – Preaching

Isaiah 41: 8-10, 17-20; Matthew 25: 14-30

July 23, 2017

There’s an old story about a young girl who is quizzing her father on his fears – trying to make a list of that which he is afraid of. She asks him if he’s afraid of monsters...’Nope.’ ‘Are you afraid of spiders?’ ‘No, not spiders.’ ‘Are you afraid of big, slimy, wiggly worms?’ ‘No, I love big, slimy, wiggly worms!’ This continues on for a while as the girls lists everything she can imagine and her father continues to show his lack of fear for one thing after another. Finally, when she exhausts her list, she proclaims, “So, Daddy, the only thing in this whole world you’re afraid of, is Mommy?” (Smart man!)

Seriously, though, fear is an amazing powerful force in life. While there seem to be those people for whom that fear-inducing neurological pathway in the brain just doesn’t quite process as quickly as others, the truth is that, for the vast majority of us, fear (in some way or another) is a part of every day.

- Child development specialists tell us that, as infants, we experience fear when our parents and loved ones disappear from our field of vision and our minds haven’t yet accrued the understanding that they still exist and will return.
- As we get a little older our fear turns to that magnificent creation of our imaginations that is the monster under the bed, the creature in the closet, or those things that go ‘bump’ in the night!
- As we become tweens and teens, the fear grows more social and begins to surround questions of how people look at us and what our friends will do in response to what we say and do ourselves. And it just goes on and on...
- By adulthood, we are constantly engaged (sometimes subconsciously and sometimes quite fervently) in the fears that we face. Fear of injury...fear of job loss...fear of financial strife...fear of relational discord...fear of fading independence...fear of losing control...fear of heights...fear of small spaces...fear of flying...

I could stand here all day and list the fears that we encounter day after day after day and no matter long I would go on there would be people in this room who could come up with more things that I had missed, because there is just that much fear that envelopes our lives. One article I read, in preparation for today’s message was written by a neuroscientist named Nick Weiler

who framed the circumstance of life in this way...he said that, “We live most of our lives poised between the carrot of desire and the whip of fear.”

I thought that was a great way of describing it, because I want to be clear that I don't mean to imply that we live fearful lives. I don't mean to paint a picture of humanity curled up in the fetal position, shuttering in the corner, terrified of each moment that life will thrust upon us. But, what I do think is that fear – the neurological activity of our amygdala – is a far more prominent presence in our daily decisions than we often realize. In the vast majority of our living we exist in that pronounced tension between the carrot of desire and the whip of fear and we are making choices, constantly, about what will drive our decisions. Will we be driven by hope, by dreams, by possibilities, by potential, dare I say, by faith? Will we be driven by God's promises to be with us and God's proclamation that we 'be not afraid' because He is with us? Or, will we be driven by fear – by our self-imagined works of art that in simple, and sometimes remarkably detailed ways, delineate the manner in which things might go wrong?

In our study of the parables, we turn our attention, today, to the Parable of the Talents. Julie, next week, will bring our attention back to those who are most commonly the focus of this story (the 'faithful servants' who made use of the talents). But, as you may have sensed by now, I sometimes enjoy taking something of the apologetic stance for those in these stories who have been historically villainized, and that's where I landed for today – on that poor guy who took his talent, buried it in the field, and got his head ripped off by the owner when he returned it unused, but also unharmed.

Obviously, our focus traditionally goes to the question of what we are doing with the blessings, the gifts, the 'talents,' the resources God has given us. That is undoubtedly the main message of this parable, and it's one we need to hear repeatedly in our lives. (In fact, quick side note for you trivia buffs – did you know that the word 'talent,' as we know it in the English language, is actually drawn from this parable?) But, I think the circumstance of this final character – the 'villain' of the story who receives the chastisement not only of the owner, but of the vast majority of the preachers who have spoken on this story over the past 2,000 years – that character who buried his talent has something to say to us not just about what decisions we make in regard to these things, but what sentiments and motivations we are embracing as we make them.

You see, I think we sometimes overlook the truth that many of us would have made the exact same decision. Think of how you act when you are driving someone else's car, or staying in someone else's home, or using someone else's things...the reality is that you look at it a bit differently. You're a little more careful, a little more cautious, a little more attuned to making sure something doesn't go wrong – because it's one thing to damage or hinder your own property, but it's a whole other thing to let that happen to someone else's. And, in this case, we are not talking about borrowing someone's shovel!

The amount of money left behind here, for this final gentleman, is one talent. To put that in perspective, a talent was, roughly, the value of fifteen years' worth of wages for a laborer at the time – which is what this man was. This man has been entrusted with a sum of money that it would take him 15 years to earn! We're talking about a young school-teacher being entrusted

with \$1,000,000! This isn't their friend's bike that they could replace if something went wrong – this wasn't even their friend's car that they could slowly repay over the course of a couple of years. This was an amount of money so astonishing that he'd never, ever, be able to pay it back.

And, in addition to all of that, the property owner who left this money behind was his boss! Not only that, he wasn't a nice guy. Listen to the words this man shares when he returns the buried money. “Master, I knew that 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.” This man was not only his boss, but he was a crook! He was known to go out and harvest the fields of other farmers – this clearly was not a man you wanted to cross.

So, put all this together. This man was entrusted with money that wasn't his, of an amount he could never, ever, repay, and by a man who was known to be dishonest and ruthless! And, we villainize him for burying that money? I don't know about you, but I seriously doubt I would have ever accepted that money in the first place, and I certainly don't know that I would have been any different in what I did with it. He was scared – justifiably terrified of screwing up – and that fear drove his decisions. And, what I want to suggest is that that question, the question of the what drives our decisions in every day, is the hidden gem that lies a little deeper in this parable of Jesus.

One of the constant and recurring themes of Scripture is trust in God. Whether it is the ‘Be not afraid’ passage of Isaiah that we read a bit ago, the assuring words of the 23rd Psalm, the call to trust in God in John 14, or any of a hundred other passages and stories of our faith, so much of the Bible revolves around the call to trust in God, and the reassurance that we can trust in God, in our lives. And, I think a major reason for that goes right back to where we began – with the pronounced role that the emotion and experience of fear can play in each and every decision that we make.

Now, don't misunderstand me. Fears are often reasonable, they are often rational, and they frequently serve a valuable purpose in helping to steer us away from misguided decisions. The last thing I mean to suggest is that fear, in and of itself, is a damaging or problematic thing. But, I think the question that is raised in our parable is the extent to which fear is driving our decisions, and the question that is raised in faith is how often we are including our trust in the promises of God when we evaluate those fears.

The neuroscientist of which I spoke earlier, when he described that tension between the carrot of desire and the whip of fear, painted a picture of snake enclosure with a winning million dollar lottery ticket on the other side. Absent the ticket – very few would decide to walk into the enclosure full of snakes. Absent the enclosure, we'd all gladly grab the ticket. The tension arises in whether or not we will walk through the enclosure to get the ticket, and the author explains that much of that decision becomes a question of evaluating the validity of the fear. Assuming we trust that the ticket is genuine (and thus the reward worthwhile), we ask ourselves whether the snakes are docile, whether or not they are poisonous or prone to bite, we ask ourselves if there would be some sort of barrier between ourselves and the snake as we walked through. In other words, we examine the rationality of the fear in order to decide whether the

fear is sufficient enough to outweigh the possibilities and potential of what we can claim if we take that fear on.

All I'm suggesting, today, is that we sometimes need to allow our faith, our trust in the promises of God, to play a greater role in that equation. We will never live without fear, nor should we. We will never ignore every fear we face, nor should we. I am by no means suggesting that we should dive head-first into every snake-pit our lives place before us. But, in the vast majority of our living we exist in that pronounced tension between the carrot of desire and the whip of fear and we are making choices, constantly, about what will drive our decisions. Will we be driven by hope, by dreams, by possibilities, by potential, dare I say, by faith? Will we be driven by God's promises to be with us and God's proclamation that we 'be not afraid' because He is with us? Or, will we be driven by fear – by our self-imagined works of art that in simple, and sometimes remarkably detailed ways, delineate the manner in which things might go wrong?

The 'villain' of our story, that third servant, did the latter as he buried that talent in fear. The former two overcame that fear and made the most of what they had been given. All I'm suggesting is that, perhaps, this parable isn't only about making the most of what we've been given, but is also, just maybe, a reminder to us all of what can come when we choose to act in faith over fear.