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## Fear Factor

### Matthew 25:14-30

A Baccalaureate Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on May 13-14, 2016 by the

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Today I would like to talk to you about the F-word, the real one. Don't get nervous, President Brodhead, because this F-word is fear. And as you look around and perhaps surprisingly see some classmates you thought would never graduate, fear may be setting in right now because you might think that this gathering, therefore, can't possibly be for graduation after all but rather some kind of academic purgatory. But have no fear class of 2016, you are graduating and you can dab your way out of here!

Yet fear is real, even post-graduation. Just ask poet Emily Dickinson who lived a lot of her life in isolation and was believed to suffer from severe anxiety. This sulky poet of sorrows' work might not be the best reading to put a pep in your step nor is her work highly recommended for graduation celebrations. Dickinson may seem like a downer because her poetry is not an ode to joy but more like an ode to truth. Sometimes the truth is captured in her words like this, "I lived on dread" and she wasn't even talking about that all-nighter or that professor whose grading system made no sense to you or that roommate whose cleaning habits irritated the heck out of you. Dickinson understood her mortality in such a way that she penned other lines such as, "Because I could not stop for Death—He kindly stopped for me" and then one of the most haunting lines, "I felt a funeral, in my brain." That could describe how your brain feels after four years at Duke—brain dead. But it might also be that she said that because she realized fear's impact on her life.

Dickinson fits right in with the gospel of Matthew. There's so much fear and anxiety in the subtext of the main text as we hear in the larger gospel narrative about the coming of the Son of Man, judgment, famine, earthquakes, false prophets, and the plot to kill the One who claimed to be God. There seems to be so many good reasons to fear in that ancient setting.

This is why I feel sorry for that one servant, the one with the least, the one who has one coin or talent. So much is made of the other two servants who multiply what they've been given. They double their earnings. Five coins turn into ten. Two coins turn into four. They got the prized job in Silicon Valley. They're economically prosperous and according to Ancient Near Eastern news, this caused their master to do the whip and nae nae dance. These two servants are like the "goody two shoes" in a chemistry class. Always getting the right answer, helping the teacher, never getting into trouble, always getting good grades, always getting the attention, always getting the praise party, always receiving accolades, seemingly without a trouble in the world.

But I'm drawn to that one servant with the least. The underdog. I feel bad for him. No profit, no party, no pat on the back from his master. I'm rooting for him because I'm rooting for us. I say that because we may see our own reflection in *his* story, which is a story of fear.

"Master, I knew that you are a hard man. You harvest grain where you haven't sown. You gather crops where you haven't spread seed. So I was afraid. And I hid my valuable coin in the ground." I was afraid and I hid. I wish there was a medical shot for fear just like the flu shot, to strengthen our immune system to keep fear at bay. But it doesn't work like that even for Duke graduates or

employees. Fear can kidnap you and hold you hostage and nothing may seem to be able to pay a ransom to set you free. I understand. Fear can be intimidating.

And there is phobia mania, so many phobias that I'm afraid I can't name them all. The fear of death, illness, pain, and despair. The fear of being unloved and rejected, unknown or embarrassed. The fear of poverty or hunger or aging. The fear of loss or failure. The fear of heights or elevators. Fear of the dark. Fear of spiders or crowds. Or even that particular fear one writer names—the fear “of eating an anchovy.” (Mary Ruefle)

“I was afraid. And I hid my valuable coin in the ground.” This story is not really about making money. It's about what we do with what we've been given by God and how we are stewards of our own lives. There's no celebration for the last servant with the least. It's a lament and it should cause us to lament for him and for every buried gift in the ground. I hid my valuable coin in the ground. There's no growth, no development, no flourishing, no joy in his life because of fear. He was formed, or malformed by fear, going nowhere with his gifts and his life. This is not just about our coins, our value, our talents, and our gifts that we hide. This is about the way we hide ourselves because of fear. I was afraid and I hid. We may shrink back from opportunities given to us because of fear.

Fear can paralyze us, making us inactive and stagnant, keeping life at a standstill, no matter with what we've been graced or how well we did at Duke. And fear can prevent us from making tough decisions or cause us to avoid certain people, places, or things. With fear, no one will take risks and without risks, there will be no growth. “I was afraid. And I hid my valuable coin in the ground.” I did nothing but fear. This servant buried his potential, his God-given gifts. He hid because of fear.

It doesn't take much to realize that we live in a culture of fear. Just thinking that Kanye West may run for President might scare anyone or just say, Zika virus, Ebola, ISIS, Boko Haram, gun violence, governmental surveillance, immigrants, refugees, and the shockwaves of fear will be felt. Sometimes, the media will make you fear things for no reason whatsoever. Some politicians run campaigns built on fear. We might as well stay indoors and barricade ourselves in our bedrooms or labs. But that's exactly what fear wants—to be alone with us, to cuddle up to us and have us all to itself.

And when we allow fear to have a field day in our lives, it's actually the end of our lives because we let it bury us. And if you don't bury it, it will bury you and your gifts and everything you have to offer to the world. This servant didn't just bury his coin. Fear buried him. I was afraid and I hid. There were no professional mourners on site but this is surely a death because fear will not only inhibit your flourishing, it will kill you. “Take the worthless servant and throw him outside into the darkness. People there will be weeping and grinding their teeth.” In other words, what he was told was, “Ohhhhhhhhhhhh, see ya!”

This isn't what you want for your life but as Dickinson says, “While I was fearing it came, But came with less of the fear, Because that fearing it so long, Had almost made it dear.” Fear was so familiar that it became dear. We can become so used to fear that it becomes dear to us, a part of our spiritual DNA in which we nurture it like an intimate relationship. It loves us and we love it. Yet its love controls and eventually cannibalizes our lives, and all that is left at that point is not our life, but fear, standing victorious, and boasting about its future when in fact there is no future with fear.

In the book, *What Jamie Saw*, the characters are so sick with fear settled inside of them that they don't even know "what living feels like without it." And this is the trick of fear—that you forget that it is fear, so it just feels like it's your life.

Fear can consume you. In 1819, the whale ship *Essex*, which is the basis for Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, set sail from Nantucket Island for a routine voyage for whales; it would eventually be anything but routine. There were 20 American sailors on the ship. In 1820, the ship was 3,000 miles off the coast of Chile in South America when it was struck by a sperm whale that made a hole in the hull of the ship. The ship began to flood with seawater so the men got into three small whaleboats as their ship sunk. They were about 1,200 miles from the closest island to the west. Some of the sailors wanted to go there but others didn't, because they feared that cannibals lived on those islands, which was a prevalent rumor in that day. They decided not to go to the closest island and head in another direction, which was further away, even with their limited supplies of food and water. Fear led them in another direction. Eventually, due to lack of food and water, some sailors began to die. And what happened? Ironically, the sailors end up doing the same thing they feared—eating one another. Fear will consume you and if you feast on it you will die even while you live. You'll die young. You'll die with your eyes wide open. You'll die with your dreams. This isn't just a funeral in your brain; your whole life will become a funeral procession because you'll be a dead man or woman walking, which is one of the greatest tragedies of our mortal life. I was afraid and I hid. This is a story of our own burial.

Sometimes we pay for our own funeral fees, as we fear our own success and flourishing. We fear ourselves and our potential, our own thriving, so we bury it right along with our dreams because we think that one coin, that one little gift, that one insight, won't amount to anything. But there is only one of you in the world so don't hide. Do you.

I don't want to be a dour Emily Dickinson-like preacher today. Fear isn't just destructive. It can be constructive. It can prevent you from touching a fire with a bare hand. It can prevent you from opening up the airplane door when you are 30,000 feet in the air. It can prevent you from walking in the middle of a busy highway. Fear may be a hardwired biological version of common sense. Fear, in the business world, can be viewed as "productive paranoia" (Karen Thompson Walker). It can be constructive and this is a good thing.

However, when fear destroys a life's purpose and potential, it's a tragedy. So as you graduate, face your fear and bury it. The servant buried the wrong thing. He should have buried fear. If we succumb to our fears, we won't do the things God wants us to do and we won't go where God wants us to go. On the eve of his assassination, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., proclaimed, "I'm not fearing any man" which is why he could get to the mountaintop.

So bury fear today because fear is linked to the desire to hide—I was afraid and I hid. Fear will make you shrink back rather than live into the grand future set before you. Fear will make you smaller than God wants you to be so bury it today and cast it out with love because love is stronger than fear. Let this be the day that fear is finished. Bury it and don't ever dig it up again.

My name is Luke Powery and I approve this message.