
Burying Fear

Matt 25:14-30

A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery at Duke Chapel on November 16, 2014

If you're having a bad day, reading the poetry of Emily Dickinson may not be the best idea. She will not necessarily give you a lift to your day. She could be called the sulky poet of sorrows. She lived a lot of her life in isolation and was believed to suffer from severe anxiety. Much of her poetry is not for early morning reading while you drink your coffee. Her poetry is not an ode to joy but more like an ode to truth, to the way life really is sometimes. At one point, she wrote, "I lived on dread." At another time, she said, "Because I could not stop for Death –He kindly stopped for me." For Dickinson, life isn't really about upholding morality but it is about mortality, death and life, life and death. This is so much a part of her psyche that she says something I would have never imagined. She says, "I felt a funeral, in my brain." Wasn't I right that this is not early morning reading? She's so mortal and understands our human limitations; that's why I'm attracted to her work.

Dickinson understands how even fear operates. She fits right in with the gospel of Matthew at this point. There's so much fear and anxiety as we hear about the coming of the Son of Man, judgment, famine, earthquakes, the destruction of the temple, false prophets, and the plot to kill Jesus. There seems to be good reasons to fear.

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're economically prosperous and their master is, a la Pharrell Williams, "happy...like a room without a roof." These two servants are like the "goody two shoes" in a 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, always Christ-like, a "spiritual goody two shoes."

But I'm drawn to that one servant with the least. The loser, the one with odds against him, with his back against the wall. 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. He seems so much more real, more human, like us. If I lift up today's scripture lesson as a mirror, we may see our own reflection in *his* story, 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. Fear is a "hound of hell" (Howard Thurman) but today I'm telling hell to go to hell because I'm so tired of fear. Aren't you? I wish there was a shot for fear just like the flu shot, to strengthen our spiritual immune system to keep fear at bay. But it doesn't work like that. Fear has kidnapped some of you and made you a hostage and nothing seems to be able to pay a ransom to set you free. I understand. Fear can be intimidating. Even when fear was on trial and obviously guilty of harassing the people of God, the judge still found him innocent because even the judge feared retaliation.

There are 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, unknown, and humiliated. The fear of poverty or hunger or aging. The fear of loss. The fear of heights or elevators. The fear of the dark and the boogie man under the bed. The fear of spiders or lizards or crowds. Or even that particular fear writer Mary Ruefle names—the fear "of eating an anchovy."

"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. 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 ourselves and for every buried gift in the ground. There's no growth, no development, no flourishing, no joy in his life because of fear. He was formed, or better said, malformed by fear, going nowhere with his gifts and his life with which God graced him. 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 out of fear of God, or at least our notions of God, and who we think God is—that master who was a hard man.

Our perception of God shapes our actions or lack thereof. Our fears tell us stories. Stories that make us think God is out to get us and that every wrong move or thought God is adding to his list of punishments, or that God is the spiritual FBI tapping our phones, listening in to our every word, tracking us through our iPhones to see our every move. And because of this distorted theological outlook, who we think God is and what God is doing, we end up paralyzed due to the idea of a policing, surveillance-driven God who wants to arrest us and throw us away to the land of eternal weeping.

Fear will make you think lots of crazy things. It paralyzes us so that there's only inactivity and stagnation. Life is then at a standstill no matter what God has given us. And fear will 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 and phobia mania.

It doesn't take much to realize that we live in a culture of fear. In Alamance County, there's a new nonprofit organization called Benevolence Farm, located on 13 acres, that aims to help *former* women prisoners reenter society. Women can stay there for up to two years and learn how to garden and farm. But some in that community oppose this Farm because there are no fences or armed guards and they fear for their children who have to walk past this property from school back to home. To some, this is not a "benevolence farm;" they call it a "prison farm." "They are not like us," some say. This is what fear sounds like.

Or just say, Ebola, ISIS, Boko Haram, Russian bombers threatening to fly near US territory, gun violence, governmental surveillance, and the shockwaves of fear will be felt. Sometimes, the media will make you fear things for no reason whatsoever except perhaps for higher ratings. Some politicians even run on campaigns built on fear, breeding a society of fear. We might as well stay indoors and barricade ourselves in our bedrooms. But that's exactly what fear wants—to be alone with us, to have us all to itself.

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. There were no professional mourners on site but this is surely a death. Fear will not only inhibit your flourishing but it will kill you. "Take the worthless servant and throw him outside into the darkness. People there will be weeping and grinding their teeth." This is the imagery for hell (8:12, 22:13) but for this man it is hell on earth. Emily Dickinson was right to say, "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 nourish and 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 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 kill you. None of us feared being born, right? But how many of us fear death? Yet even before we die physically, feasting on fear can kill you so that you die even while you sort of live. You'll die young. You'll die with your eyes wide open. Fear can cause the death of your life even while you're living. This is not just a funeral in your brain; your whole life is a funeral because you are dead. A dead man or woman walking is one of the greatest tragedies of our mortal life, when a human life becomes an existential valley of dry bones. Our ultimate physical death is not the greatest tragedy of life; remember what Paul says, "for me to live is Christ and to die is gain." The

greatest tragedy is to be dead even while you're living. Inhaling and exhaling fear. I was afraid and I hid. This is a story of our own burial.

Sometimes we pay for our own funeral fees because we ironically fear our own success and flourishing. We fear ourselves and what could be, our potential, our own thriving, so we bury it right along with our dreams because we think that one coin, that one little gift won't amount to anything. We have drunk the Kool-Aid about the limits of who we are and what we can do with what God has given and fear straightjackets us all the way to the grave.

I don't want to be an Emily Dickinson-like preacher this morning. Fear is not just destructive. It can be constructive. Fear can prevent you from touching a fire with a bare hand. Fear can prevent you from opening up the airplane door when you are 30,000 feet in the air. Fear can prevent you from being a fool and keep you from walking in the middle of a busy highway. Fear may be a hardwired biological version of common sense. One TED talk speaker reminds us that in the business world there is such a thing called "productive paranoia" (Karen Thompson Walker). Fear can be constructive—for example, the fear of not hurting one another. This is a good thing.

But when fear destroys a life's purpose and potential, it is a tragedy. And grace never condones fear. God never blesses fear. "Great artists are those, in the end, who do not have a failure of nerve. Afraid, yes, but there they are, having locked themselves alone in a room with fear" (George Oppen). So this morning, face your fear and bury it. The servant buried the wrong thing. He should have buried fear. The fear of rejection, the fear of inadequacy, the fear of failure, the fear of greatness. 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've been to the mountaintop...I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land." He got to the mountaintop and saw the promised land, and the glory of the coming of the Lord, because as he said in that same sermon, "I'm not fearing any man." Excuses born of fear will hinder the call of God on your life and you will lose your life. Fear didn't work for Moses who thought he couldn't speak eloquently enough. Fear didn't work for Jeremiah who thought he was too young. Fear didn't work for Mary who thought her virginity couldn't handle divinity.

Bury fear today because fear is linked to the desire to hide—I was afraid and I hid. It will make you shrink back. It will make you smaller than God wants you to be because God calls you to be and do bigger than you. How many dreams have been unfulfilled because of fear? Bury fear today.

And this is possible because we do not serve a scaredy-cat God. They killed Jesus and they buried him due to fear. Little did they know that they buried their salvation in a grave because fear will make you think wrong is right. But fear actually reveals the absence of God's presence. And even the fear of the naysayers could not stop him because God loved the world so much that through Jesus Christ and his resurrection he overcame fear and death. Perfect love not only casts out fear, love is stronger than fear and stronger than death. Jesus comes to bury our fear once and for all so that it doesn't bury us.

Let this be the day that fear is finished. Bury it and don't ever dig it up again. If you're a Christian, there's no fear in the love of the resurrected Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. "No Fear" should really be the motto of every Christian because Christ didn't call us to be fearful; he called us to be faithful. And through our faithfulness, we can enter the celebration of his everlasting presence at the wedding banquet table of the joyful feast of the people of God. There's lots of wine and food but no fear and tears.

Sing with all the people of God

And join in the hymn of all creation....

For the Lamb who was slain

has begun his reign....

This is the feast of victory for our God.

Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!