



**Meditation for the 24th Sunday after Pentecost
November 15, 2020**

In Sunday's gospel we hear the parable of the talents: Jesus tells the story of a landowner who entrusts each of his three stewards with a large amount of gold or silver ("talents") while he is away. Two of the stewards invest their talents for significant profit; however, the third buries his because he fears the wrath of the landowner, and thus has no profit to show. In fury, the landowner casts this steward "to the outer darkness."

Scholars offer two contradictory interpretations of this parable. On the one hand, in the theological context of Matthew's gospel the third steward loses everything because he has been paralyzed by fear and has consequently wasted the gift given to him freely. This reading confronts us with the nightmare that haunts many of us --that we may have nothing fruitful to show for our lives because we have not made use of the opportunities that we have been given. In this context, God is generous beyond measure, but will hold us accountable for how we use the gifts given us. More often than anything else he said during his ministry Jesus admonished his followers, *Do not be afraid*. According to this interpretation of the parable, the third steward fails to follow Jesus' teaching.

On the other hand, in the historical context of landowners who relentlessly exploited the poor by charging exorbitant interest and ultimately taking their land when their debt became insurmountable, the third steward resists being lured into acting on the landowner's behalf, and he loses everything as a consequence. He refuses to be complicit in an unjust system from which he himself would profit. In this reading, the third steward trusts in the divine justice that is fundamentally different from the self-serving judgements of the wealthy and powerful. This reading confronts us with a different nightmare that haunts many of us --that if we do stand up to systemic injustice we will lose everything. According to this interpretation, the third steward exemplifies the courage that is required to follow Jesus' teaching and to align ourselves with the most vulnerable.

Both interpretations remind us that Jesus' exhortation—*do not be afraid*—is not at all easy to follow. Indeed, it may be hard to imagine a more difficult command—or a more costly invitation. Increasingly for us--as for Jesus' followers--fear permeates every corner of our lives: fear of the pandemic and the threat it poses to our health, our relationships, and our financial stability; fear of political instability—despite the unambiguous affirmation of democracy in the number of voters in this election; fear that our faith community will not be support us; fear of being blindsided in a future we can no longer imagine for ourselves or our children.

Jesus has made it possible for us to say to each other—

There is much to fear.

Do not be afraid.

*Spirit of comfort and longing,
enfold my fear,
unclothe my pride,
unweave my thoughts,
uncomplicate my heart,
and give me surrender:
that I may tell my wounds,
lay down my work,
and greet the dark.*

-from *Daily Prayer for All Seasons*