

23rd Sunday after Pentecost, 2014

Gospel: Matthew 25:14-30

Sermon Title: “No Fear”

I was a teenager when my parents bought a vacation home in Florida. For us kids, Disney World became our regular playground. Little sister Vivian, anxiously awaited the big day. That was the day she reached 44 inches in height. She was now finally big enough to ride the best roller coaster in the park – Space Mountain. So, my younger brother - Kenneth and I took her to Space Mountain for this first time roller coaster adventure.

But somehow, as we stood in the long line, Vivian started to freak out. She began to scream ... “No, no – don’t want to go!” She buried her face into my legs and sobbed loudly, “Afraid. Afraid.” I did not know what to do. But, Kenneth did. He knelt down beside her. He was absolutely calm and addressed her fears: “Look Vivian, I am right here beside you. There is nothing to fear. I will hold your hand. I will not leave you. There is nothing to fear. I promise.” Vivian looked up tearfully into her big brother’s eyes, took his hand and chose to trust him.

The three of us got separated on the ride. I ended up waiting for Vivian and Kenneth at the exit. They came out a few minutes later. Vivian was positively beaming. When she saw me she began to run. She was screaming again. She threw her arms around me ... “Look at me, Yvonne! Look at me. No Fear! No Fear!”

We are quick to make to make fun of fears. There have been many television comedy shows that get laughs by portraying the irrational fears of their characters. One of my favorites was MONK – which followed the crime solving gifts of the main character who was described as a “defective detective”. Adrian Monk was considered “defective” because he was plagued with a multitude of irrational fears. He even kept a written list of his fears which included seemingly insignificant things like milk, ladders and ladybugs. The comedy revolved around the inevitable mishaps of Monks life as he tried to navigate those fears.

But the truth of the matter is that we all have fears. What seems an insignificant fear to one person can be a very real fear to another. My young friend Matt is deathly afraid of birds. And, no matter what he does they seem to follow him everywhere. I was quick to laugh – until I began to realize that I have my own irrational fears.

I don't like spiders or mice. I make my husband – Craig, come and get rid of them. I don't like big dogs or thunder and lightning storms either. The point is – we all have fears.

And, so we come to today's gospel story – the Parable of the Talents. I am fascinated by the actions of the third slave. He is the one who is entrusted with the smallest amount by the master. Upon receiving it he immediately goes off and hides it, by literally digging a hole and burying it. And, when the master returns he is quick to tell him – "I did this because I was afraid of you."

It seems to me that if we are truthful with ourselves, we must admit that we are most like this third slave. More often than not, we are afraid. We live in fear. In fact, we live in a world that feeds on our fears. The stories in the media – on the news, on the internet – are fear stories because fear sells. We are often motivated by fear. Fear makes us turn inward towards ourselves and away from the world around us. Fear makes us lock our doors and shut our eyes. Fear compels us to bury our emotions and hide our beliefs. In fear there is no room for joy.

We live in a world that often dwells in darkness. Some of our fears are imagined. Others are quite real. There seems to be wars in all parts of our world. Ebola is killing thousands. We are afraid for our children and our grandchildren. We live in a political climate that plays on our fears. We are afraid for what the future will bring in the environment, health care, immigration, terrorism, the economy. It is easy to spend fear-filled and sleepless nights wondering if it will ever stop or if it will only get worse. Will we keep our jobs? Will we have to move? Will we run out of money before we run out life? How will we support our families? It is easy to feel panicky. And, then there is, of course our ultimate and often unspoken fear – the fear of death. There appears to be little room for joy. All of this – seems to be simply further proof that our life is totally unpredictable and we have every right to be afraid. There is nothing or no one to really trust. Or so it seems...

My young friend Carley has a shirt which bears a symbol which often confuses those who see it. She has had many conversations with people about it. "What does it say?" – the person will ask her. "You mean you can't see it?" Carley will reply. "Just read between the lines." She insists. The person will scrunch up their face and concentrate. "You mean," Carley challenges, "You can't see JESUS?!" Then suddenly a wave of recognition will come across the persons face when they see that the symbol is actually the name of Jesus. And, what is even more interesting to me is that once you finally see Jesus you can see nothing else. Because it is in the seeing of Jesus that fear is dispelled.

It is God's love that frees us from fear. The third slave was afraid of the master because he did not know him. It is in knowing and seeing that we are no longer a slave to fear but rather we receive the gift of freedom through faith. In fact, upon his return the master invites the first two slaves to "enter into the joy of your master." In faith there is the gift of joy.

But it seems, like the third slave gets nothing – in fact his consequence seems to be death. But the truth of the matter is that the story does not end here for any of us. The story ends in the upper room where once again the disciples have buried themselves behind locked doors. They are afraid. Jesus has been crucified. There is no joy – no hope. There is only crushing fear. And Jesus comes and stands among them. He says, "Be not afraid." In fact, Jesus invites us to trust Him saying: "Listen, Child of God – I am right here beside you. There is nothing to fear. I will hold your hand. I will not leave you. There is nothing to fear. I promise."

Because you see, being Christian does not mean we have any less human fears. Christians are not perfect. Christians are not in control. Christians do not have all the answers. Christians are not better than other people. Christians do not have the perfect theological response to every question. Rather, Christians are those who have learned that God alone can be trusted. God alone can be trusted to give us peace amid our fears. God alone can be trusted to transform our fears into joy. God alone can be trusted to erase our fears ... even the fear of death.

And so it is that when we reach heaven we too can run towards God screaming all the way "No Fear! No Fear!" and throw ourselves into His arms. Amen.