

Matthew 25:14-30 Sermon
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The year was 1828. A man named John was the largest land and slave owner in Mercer County Kentucky. He was a prominent and successful businessman. He learned the business of landowning from his grandfather John who emigrated from Bristol, London in the early 1700's. Grandpa John arrived at the shores of Virginia where land was cheap. Taking advantage of this opportunity, he quickly became a large landholder. Now his grandson had done the same after moving to Kentucky. John had grown to an old age in 1828, especially for this time. He was 88 years old. John recognized that his time on earth was drawing to a close, and he wanted to get his affairs in order. John created a will to partition all of his vast land and other possessions. Amongst those possessions, John needed to decide to whom he would give his slaves. Instead of giving his slaves to his children, John was an early abolitionist and gave his slaves their freedom when he emancipated them upon his death in 1828. Each of those slaves, although they likely came from different parts of Africa, were given his last name, which was "Meaux." One of those 16 emancipated slaves on that ledger in John Meaux's will was my great-great-great grandfather. On that day in 1828, one of my ancestors was given his freedom from his master. From that day through the rest of his life, he was posed with both the burden and the blessing of deciding how to use and live in his freedom.

In the gospel reading, we are given a very challenging parable. It is loaded with topics that often chafe us and are difficult to talk about. The slaves or servants, depending on the version of Matthew, were given an extraordinary gift. One talent

in those days was equal to several years of daily wages. Imagine being a slave where every day is simply about basic survival and your master entrusts you with incredible wealth. Literally bags of gold were entrusted to the three servants in this parable. Some were given more than others, but only according to their ability. The question for me in reflecting on this text was not why Jesus chose to use the power dynamic of master and slave to convey this message. The question for this week was not why one slave received one talent, or two, or even five. The question that challenged me this week is the same that my great, great, great grandfather had to wrestle with –would the slaves be daring enough; would they have faith enough to seize this extraordinary opportunity to *better themselves and those around them*, or would they squander this once in a lifetime opportunity because they lived in fear?

What parallels can we draw for the church and the people of God? As the people of God, we may not have personally experienced receiving a bag of gold (like the servants in Matthew), or emancipation from slavery (like my ancestor), but we also are beneficiaries of an extraordinary gift, which is God's grace. It's a grace that was purchased by the blood of Jesus and his suffering on the Cross. It's a grace that was made complete by resurrection. It's a grace that liberates us each day to walk by faith. To be given this grace means that God understands us and knows not only *our ability* but *our responsibility* to act on God's grace; to make God's grace bountiful and share it freely with those around us, in our community, and with the world.

So what holds us back? For the slave in Matthew and for many of us, it is fear. What is fear? How does it affect us? To answer this question, I trusted a reliable source. I asked Alexa. And so, I asked Alexa, "Alexa, what is fear?" Her response was

“Fear is the emotion experienced in anticipation of some specific pain or danger usually accompanied by a desire to flee or fight.” We all experience fear. For me, it’s snakes. It doesn’t matter if it’s a garter snake or a boa constrictor, the effect is the same. For some, we’ve experience fear as a reaction to a difficult prognosis or loss. For others, we’ve experience fear or feel threatened when we are challenged to rethink a view or perspective. The thread that connects each of these is that we fear what we don’t know or understand. When it comes to human relations, if we, or institutions, embrace the fear that comes along with a lack of knowledge or understanding, we are quick to identify what we don’t understand as the “other” and we create space that allows that fear to dehumanize and disenfranchise.

I remember a conversation I had with Dr. Robert Fisch, a retired physician at the U of M. During our conversation, I learned that Dr. Fisch not only experienced the Hungarian Revolution but he survived a Nazi concentration camp during the Holocaust. I was so curious because I had never met a Holocaust survivor. So, I asked Dr. Fisch about his experience in the concentration camp. Dr. Fisch surprised me in his response. He shared that the greatest atrocity was not the barbaric and murderous acts that he witnessed with his own eyes in the concentration camp. Rather, the greatest atrocities were the incremental steps taken to accentuate the differences between Jews and non-Jews and how that fear turned into otherness and inequality providing a false justification to strip Jews of their basic human dignity. For Dr. Fisch, this inequality and injustice was the enduring stain of the Holocaust.

Inequality and injustice based on our fears and differences manifest themselves no only in our history books but exist in our day and time.

- We live in a time of fear and inequality when government officials fall silent even when faced with the knowledge that mostly brown and poor people, including children, in Flint, Michigan are drinking and bathing in contaminated and dangerous water.
- We live in a time of fear and inequality when, some 60 years after Brown v. Board of Education, just 50% of seniors in North Minneapolis will graduate from high school on time.
- We live in a time of fear and inequality when we not only tolerate but also financially invest in the quadrupling of the prison population over the past thirty years mostly impacting people of color and low income Americans.
- We live in a time of fear and inequality when, according to the World Economic Forum, we've structured our economic systems such that the 85 richest people in the world own more wealth than the 3 billion poorest people combined.

What are we to do as the people of God in the face fear and injustice? How can we live in this world and in this time so that God can say to us well done thy good and faithful servant...you have been faithful over a few things and I will put you in charge of many more. There is no single path or simple solution to this question, but the end of Matthew 25 gives us guidance and words of inspiration. In Matthew 25:31. Jesus says, "[F]or I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I

was in prison and you came to visit me. Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”

The people of God live out the grace that we are given when we clothe and feed those in need and use our resources to combat the systems that create the enduring inequities that make it difficult for good and hardworking people to make ends meet. Well done thy good and faithful servant.

The people of God live out the grace that we are given when we recognize the words of the prophet Dr. Martin Luther King when he said, “We may have come on different ships, but we are all in the same boat now.” The fear of the stranger or the immigrant is a false fear based on ignorance and God calls for us not only to welcome them but to also speak truth to those institutions that would devalue and criminalize them. Well done thy good and faithful servant.

The people of God live out the grace that we are given when we visit the imprisoned and recognize that all of us have sinned and fallen short of the Glory of God. Rather than deconstructing their humanity out of fear while they are imprisoned, God calls the people of God to challenge the community and systems to invest in and build up these brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, and sons and daughters, whose lives still have value. Well done thy good and faithful servant.

In our Psalm reading the scripture encourages us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom. I have not been able to connect all the historical dots between 1828 and the present, but I believe that my great-great-great Grandfather had some understanding of what it meant to number his days and the wisdom that came from knowing that he lived in faith and not fear. I encourage us, the people of

God, to do the same. Act faithfully, love mercy, and continue to walk humbly with
God. Amen.