

Sermon – Faith that Risks
Scripture Lessons – Judges 4:1-9, Matthew 25:14-30
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Our first scripture reading, Judges 4:1-9a, introduces us to Deborah, who served as judge and prophetess around 1100 BCE during a time of transition in Israel's development as a nation... from tribal leadership to the anointing of their first King, Saul. In Judges 4 we see God working through shared leadership and mutual responsibility among the main characters. When asked by Barak to accompany the troops in battle, Deborah risks her own comfort and security. She is not content to simply give orders, but invests her leadership and takes action. Hear now the Word of God.

1 The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, after Ehud died. 2 So the Lord sold them into the hand of King Jabin of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor; the commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-ha-goiim. 3 Then the Israelites cried out to the Lord for help; for he had nine hundred chariots of iron, and had oppressed the Israelites cruelly twenty years. 4 At that time Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel. 5 She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites came up to her for judgment. 6 She sent and summoned Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, "The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you, "Go, take position at Mount Tabor, bringing ten thousand from the tribe of Naphtali and the tribe of Zebulun. 7 I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin's army, to meet you by the Wadi Kishon with his chariots and his troops; and I will give him into your hand." 8 Barak said to her, "If you will go with me, I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go." 9 And she said, "I will surely go with you; nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman." Then Deborah got up and went with Barak to Kedesh. Amen.

Our second scripture reading is Matthew, chapter 25, verses 14-30. We read together yet another parable which gives us a glimpse into the kingdom of God. Once again, a story taken from everyday life teaches what God desires for each of us. In Matthew's version of *The Parable of the Talents*, unlike Luke's, each servant receives an incredible sum of money. One talent equals 15 years of wages, two talents equal 30 years and five talents equal 75 years. In this simple story, it becomes clear that what the servant does with these talents provides a barometer to measure his or her core health and values. Listen now to God's Word.

14 "For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; 15 to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. 16 The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. 17 In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. 18 But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. 19 After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. 20 Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, "Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents." 21 His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." 22 And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, "Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents." 23 His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." 24 Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man,

reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; 25 so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' 26 But his master replied, "You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? 27 Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. 28 So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. 29 For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. 30 As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

The title of the sermon: Faith That Risks

The text: Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master I knew that you were a harsh man...so I was afraid and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Matthew 25:14-15a

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, teach us not to be afraid of who you are or who you call us to be. Give us the courage to risk, to grow and to change. As we reflect together on your word, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable to you. Amen.

It was Saturday, March 4, 1933. Americans across the country gathered around radios in their homes and workplaces to hear their newly elected President, Franklin D. Roosevelt address the nation. Living in the midst of a devastating depression, the people were looking for words of hope and encouragement.

I am certain that my fellow Americans expect that on my induction into the Presidency I will address them with a candor and a decision, which the present situation of our Nation impels. ... So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.

The only thing we have to fear is fear itself—This morning I invite you to explore with me the truth of these words on many different levels and in light of the parable we read together.

As Peter and I reflected together on this quote, he commented what an interesting choice of words Roosevelt made when he said fear “*paralyzes needed efforts.*” What many of the Americans listening to him on the radio that day did not know was that their new president was paralyzed. When Roosevelt was 39 years old, following a day sailing at their summer home at Campobello, a small island off Maine, Franklin felt sick when he got home and went to bed. The next morning he had a fever and three days later he could not move his legs. Franklin Roosevelt had polio.

When he spoke of “*paralyzing needed efforts*” he spoke as one who understood the struggle of fighting paralysis on a profound, personal level. He spoke as one who had faced his greatest fear and overcome tremendous physical obstacles. He spoke as one who did not retreat when it would have been understandable to do so. He spoke as one who risked moving forward with his vocation and his convictions to lead our nation through a difficult and devastating depression.

Roosevelt was speaking to the nation about the economy, yes. We would probably all agree that how one perceives the events of the world greatly affects our economy. When we are hopeful and positive, we spend money and grow the economy. When we are fearful and cautious, we hold on to our money stagnating growth.

I'm sure Roosevelt would agree that not all fear is irrational. A certain amount of fear is healthy. Em Griffen in his book The Mind Changers, which is a study of motivation, points out that moderate fear can be helpful. Proverbs teach *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge...* The capacity for respect and deference is a healthy motivating factor, whether we are talking about God, teachers, burners on the stove or crossing busy streets.

Roosevelt's words were not intended to criticize the people, who because they lost all their savings, never trusted banks or the stock market again. Many of us have family members whose lives were devastated by the depression and who are quite careful and conservative with their money. When Roosevelt talked about debilitating fear, he was talking about something larger than how one invests one's money.

In the same way, Jesus' parable must not be simplified to an investment strategy or a criticism of fiscally conservative people. It is about much more than money. In fact, this parable was so widely told that during the Middle Ages the word "talent" came into the English language as a term for God-given abilities, "gifts and graces" rather than an amount of money.

This parable is about what we do, not with our money, but with our abilities, our gifts, our strengths, our talents. In Matthew's version of the parable some are given more "talents" than others, which is actually a more accurate reflection of life than Luke's account where each receives the same.

Some are more gifted than others, and we can assume that more will be expected of these. More important than some being more gifted than others is that we receive different gifts which complement one another. The body of Christ affirms that people have different talents and is strengthened when people risk sharing and investing those talents to create a thriving, loving community of believers.

What our parable warns against is not fraud or deception but rather being too cautious with the gifts God has given us. Jesus warns us that prudence and wariness can turn into self-protection and restraint, and inhibition can turn into fear.

*'Master I knew that you were a harsh man...
I was afraid and I went and hid your talent in the ground,'*

When we are afraid we tend to get tight and rigid and we hang on to what we have so as not to lose our status quo. When we are afraid we retreat rather than advance. When we are afraid we draw back and bury ourselves rather than risk investing in other people and relationships.

But love demands risk, love demands vulnerability, confrontation, at times, and tenderness. The servants who know the Master as One who loves, as the One who risked embracing the cross on our behalf, understand that they are also expected to risk in loving...and are honored to do so.

Paul Woodruff, in his book *Reverence* distinguishes between fear and reverence. Reverence stands in awe, and awe is not the same as fear. *In fact, he says, fear of punishment is the opposite of reverence.* Fear of punishment is actually the first stage of moral development according to Lawrence Kohlberg. It's an important first stage, however if we never move beyond our fear of punishment, we never come into our own and become the person God intends us to be. Woodruff shared that in his experience the people who are the most reverent toward God are the least afraid of God...and life.

May we be people who risk in faith. May God give us the grace to do the things we think we cannot do...and the courage to invest our talents and ourselves in one another and in this community... so that on the day we meet our Maker, we have something to show for our lives and something to give back to the One who has given us all things. Amen.