

## Bearing Fruit for Christ

Matthew 25:14-30

The Department of Homeland Security is the newest of the federal departments. It was created in the wake of 9-11. But it has been riddled with problems. As one report states:

These days, the mess at the Department of Homeland Security is one of the only things that all of Washington can agree on. Disliked by both Democrats and Republicans, DHS has metastasized into the worst version of what we imagine when we think of bureaucracy: rigid, ineffective, wasteful, chaotic, and cruel. Since its inception, DHS has been on the Government Accountability Office's "High Risk List," which highlights programs vulnerable to "fraud, abuse, and mismanagement." It consistently has the lowest morale of any federal agency with more than a thousand employees, according to the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey.

But we put up with that because no politician will want to cut it. Why? Because of fear. We fear that they will lose the election if they cut security. And that fear is fueled by the specter of 9-11 and what has happened in Israel. It doesn't matter that more people died in auto accidents each year than on 9-11. Because we fear terrorism, our government will continue to pump money into security against it.

Fear is a powerful motivator. It is what will make students really begin to study after Thanksgiving with only one week left until Dead Week and finals. It is what makes us go through uncomfortable tests on our bodies. It is what makes us obey traffic laws and file our income tax.

We look at the story in Matthew 25, in fact the whole chapter, and can be hit by fear. Last week we heard the story of the Ten Virgins. Five had extra oil for their lamps and five did not. Next week we will hear how Jesus will divide between the good sheep and the bad goats. Today we hear about three servants, each given money by their master. Two good servants invest it and get a return. The third one hides it, gains no interest, and is thrown out by the master. So am I a wise virgin with extra or a foolish one without it? Am I a good sheep or bad goat? Am I the servant who invests the money or the one who hides it? I think we often picture the story as presented in children's books. The third servant is a little guy who is afraid. He is so paranoid that he will lose the one coin given to him, that he takes it to a cave under his house and buries it. He doesn't gain anything from it, but he doesn't lose it either. Yet, for that he is condemned by his master!

I don't know about you, but I feel sorry for that servant. When I was in school the rage among teenage boys was to hit the brakes and the accelerator on your car at the same time so that the wheels would spin, but you'd go nowhere. It was called "Power breaking." It was especially easy to do on one of those Dodges from the early 60s with the push button transmission. It was also murder on the tires. That's why I was never tempted to do it. If I ever

had a car, it was my dad's. I would never be caught dead doing anything to put a nick in his car. I was afraid of him. In some ways it was easier simply not to drive his car. That's why I think I would have hid the master's coin, too. I would be so afraid of losing it, that I would have been tempted to bury it.

Yet the master comes down hard on that servant. He doesn't just chew him out. He says, "Throw this worthless servant outside into the darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." "Weeping and gnashing of teeth" is Jesus' favorite expression for hell.

In the middle ages people saw Jesus as a frightening judge who would condemn them unless they lived pious lives. The servant says of his master, "I know that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed." This master sounds like a tyrant like Vladimir Putin. No wonder people in the middle ages were terrified of Jesus.

But all of that assumes that the servant's problem was fear. Yes, he said, "I was afraid, and I hid the money." But the master calls him "wicked and lazy," not a "scaredy cat." If fear is what motivated him, then the last thing he would have done is hid the money. If he knew his master had a name and reputation that made him money, he'd have invested the money. For him to say he was afraid was like saying to the teacher or professor about a due assignment, "My dog ate it."

The servant's real problem was not fear, but indifference. He didn't care. A talent was not a single coin, but a measure of weight. Even one bag of money weighing talent was worth a sizable amount. He could have invested some of the coins, without risk of losing them all.

Even if we are afraid that we haven't done enough for God and used what He has given us, we are not that third servant. Jesus is describing those who are totally indifferent, who don't care.

The harvest is done in Iowa. Despite the drought, the yields still come in. The master says to the lazy servant, "So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed?" He was using an agricultural illustration to show that if that servant had invested the money, it would have grown because of the power and reputation of that master.

But how can we invest in what God has given when we are in time of want? Our economy is getting scarier all the time. It isn't just the lack of jobs, but the lack of purchasing power. We don't have what we used to have to spend.

One way a plant bears fruit is by using a time of plenty—plenty of rain, sunshine, and nutrients—to produce fruit. Trees hold back on bearing fruit if they need the water in times of drought just to survive.

But the other way a plant can bear fruit is by sacrificing itself to the fruit. In times of want, in fact, the plant does this all the more. Corn doesn't die because of frost. As the days get shorter a corn plant focuses its energy on the husk—the fruit. It does this so much that the plant will die even without frost.

That is what Jesus, the one who told the parable of the talents, did for us. Jesus the “hard master,” sacrificed Himself for all of us. He told the story of the talents just days before He died on Good Friday. He sacrificed so that we, the fruit, could grow.

That affects how we bear fruit. It is not important how much we have, but how loving and gracious is the One who gives to us. God in Jesus harvests where there seems to be no sowing, gathers where no seed seems to have been scattered. He took a small group of disciples and turned them into the Church that grew to populate the whole Roman Empire. In Ethiopia He turns a few thousand dollars into support for missionaries on bicycles who start missions 40-100 miles away from where our friend Kebede is based.

Jesus took His death and apparent defeat and turned it into the greatest victory of all time. He is the master who can harvest where He does not sow and gather where He does not scatter seed. He can use you and me to bear fruit.

When Jesus says, “Whoever does not have, what he does have will be taken away from him,” He is not talking about you and me, unless we don't care, unless we are totally into this world and this life. Instead He says of us, “For everyone who has will be given an abundance.” We have that abundance. It is what He has given us in baptism. We are life. And as we bear fruit we will be given all, even more than we need.