

Disarming Power

Matthew 25:14-30

The woman tells the police that her husband looked so shocked when he came home that morning and saw her handling the snake. She had been delighted with the beautifully wrapped surprise package he had presented to her the day before. She still cannot understand his terrified reaction when she tossed him the snake and it bit him. Just a little nip. Nothing to get excited about. Surely he knew it was harmless. After all, ***he*** had given it to ***her***.

Having heard about the incident, a pet shop owner comes rushing in. He explains the man's odd purchase the day before. He had asked for a coral snake, but of course the owner had not sold him a real one, because everyone knows how deadly they are.

Without informing the victim, because he was so intent on a coral snake, the owner had substituted a harmless snake with markings similar to a coral snake.

The camera pans first to a shot of the dead husband laid out on the floor. It then pans left to Alfred Hitchcock standing in the wings who concludes, "Funny, Mr. Johns had no history of heart trouble." Thus we have a graphic example of being scared to death.

Although fear seldom kills, it can and does incapacitate. Fear can paralyze us. Sometimes we do not move at all for fear of moving into the unknown, maybe in the wrong direction, perhaps into harm's way. Today's parable shows what Jesus thinks of those who allow fear to shut them down.

The parable begins with a master who is going away on an extended trip. Before leaving, he calls three of his slaves together and entrusts each with a type of currency called *talents*. Notice that he gives no instructions about how they are to handle the money, as if they are mental incompetents. He leaves the disposition of the money to each one's own discretion. In fact, by simply handing it over, leaving all the decisions up to them, the master is giving the slaves an opportunity to be responsible, creative stewards. My, what a ***caring*** master.

Also consider the ***sum***. A talent was the greatest unit of Greek currency, about 10,000 denarii. Now, the value of a single denarius was a fair day's wage. A fair day's wage. If we multiply a fair day's wage by 10,000, we determine that the value of a single talent was the equivalent of 32 years' worth of wages. In other words, a ***gob*** of money. And in this instance the amount is

even more exaggerated because it is entrusted to slaves, slaves who earn no wages, slaves who themselves are owned by the master. My, my, what a generous and trusting master.

Finally, please note that the distribution is unequal. The master entrusts one slave with five talents, one with two, and one with one. Though all are called to responsible service, the master asks each one to handle no amount beyond his capability to manage. The master knows and respects the limitations as well as the abilities of each of his slaves. My, my, my, what a wise master.

After a long time, the master returns. He once again assembles his slaves, this time for an accounting. And even though I have heard, read, and studied this text a number of times, this part never fails to make me uncomfortable. I cannot help but squirm with uneasiness as each one takes a turn at “show and tell”.

It reminds me of how report card day used to be. My brother, sister and I, report cards in hand, would stand before my father. My older brother would show his first, I would go next, and then my little sister. Of course, built-in comparisons were right out there, impossible to ignore. In retrospect I can see that it was a terrible

way to handle it. It automatically set us in competition with one another and left little room for appreciation of our individual abilities. Each one's uniqueness was overshadowed by the competitiveness and judgment inherent to the system. No wonder I feel uncomfortable with this parable.

But the master of the parable does not expect the one with two talents to make five talents as the other slave has. In fact, the master's praise is ***identical*** for both the five-talent and two-talent slaves, respectively. "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." The master says all that verbatim – twice. So they are not in competition with one another after all. Unlike the report card days of my childhood, each slave is expected to deal productively ***only*** with what he has been given.

But on another level, the parable ***is*** like the old report card days. You see, my parents desperately wanted us to do our best in school, to live up to our potential, not for ***them***, but for ***ourselves***. I have developed an appreciation for that, now that I am a parent. It always troubled Darrell and me whenever we suspected that our

son Sam may have been wasting some of his abilities, slacking off, passing up a chance to learn as much as we knew he was capable of learning.

Our dismay was not from damaged parental pride. Rather it came from the pain and disillusionment we ***still*** feel when considering all the missed opportunities of life not lived to the fullest. I mean, who has not wondered how much more she could contribute to the world, how much fuller her service to God could be, if only she had taken advantage of all her opportunities? That's what I'm talking about. We just wanted to spare our child from having such regrets.

There are any number of reasons we may fall short of our potential service to God. But the one Jesus here focuses on is fear: “. . . I was ***afraid***,” Johnny One-talent whines, “and I went and hid your talent in the ground.” The role is custom made for the all-time stereotypical spineless wonder, actor Strother Martin. Can't you imagine him? All slunk over, head ducked, concentrating on his big toe digging in the dirt. Can't you hear him sniveling with that hyper nasal twang? “I was ***scared***, Lord. I was scared I'd lose it, scared I'd mess it up.”

Well, the master does not buy his excuse for a second. He calls Johnny One-talent wicked and lazy. He strips him of what little he has and casts him out into the darkness, to wail and gnash his teeth all alone. And that, by anyone's standards is bad news.

It is also bad news for us, I think. Because we live in a society gripped by fear. Paralyzed by it. Our politicians build entire campaigns around it. Some church leaders, yes, right now in the PC(USA), capitalize on it. Some of the most powerful lobbies in Washington ***bank*** on it. Not so long ago as a nation our fear was limited to internal stuff, crime in our streets, epidemics, and an unstable economy. But 9/11 broadened our fears. Indeed, as a result many Americans developed overnight into card-carrying xenophobes.

Now, I am not endorsing floating around in a euphoric cloud. Evil is ever present and we would be fools to be oblivious to it. What I ***am*** endorsing, one of the things this parable is ***saying***, is that without sufficient resistance, fear can take control of us. Fear can become an all consuming power in our lives that disarms and weakens us to the point of forsaking our commission from Christ.

Fear can stall out Christ's ministry to and with whole groups of people, only because their skin is a different color from ours. Fear can shut down our spreading of God's love and grace among people with different proclivities from ours, be it politics, language, customs, or religion.

Winston Churchill's astute observation about fear so many years ago is still true. Often it is not an outright threat, but rather **fear** of a threat that defeats us. Not a pseudo coral snake, but **fear** of it. Not the actual loss of his master's talent, but the slave's **fear** of losing it.

I wish there were a fourth slave in this story. One whom the master gives a half-talent. And when the master returns, the slave says, "Gosh, I am so sorry. I invested your money in some blue chip stock – really solid stuff – and then the bottom fell out of the market. I lost all of it." What would the master say to **him?**

Hmmmm. At that point, I believe the master would give him good news. **The** Good News: that he is forgiven, because at least he has been out there trying. That is all Christ asks us to do. Our wise, caring, generous and trusting master only asks us to try – to

try to live not in fear and trembling, but in courage and hope, remembering always his promise, “Fear not, for I am with you always, even to the end of the age. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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November 16, 2008