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Church of the Transfiguration, Manhattan, NY

Texts: Psalm 90; Zephaniah 1:7,12-18; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-10; Matthew 25: 14-15,19-29

Subject: What does it mean not to live out of fear?

Title: Living into God's generosity

In the 1991 film comedy, *Defending Your Life*, Albert Brooks plays Daniel, a middle-aged man who is killed in an auto accident. He finds himself in Judgment City, a sort of waiting room for the afterlife. Daniel goes on trial to determine whether he has made the most of his life on earth, or whether he needs to go back and try again. In this view of judgment, the most important issue determining our fate is fear: did you live your life afraid, or were you willing to take risks?

Unfortunately for Daniel it is clear that his life “has pretty much been devoted to dealing with fear.” His defender explains to him that fear is like a giant fog. “It sits on your brain and blocks everything,” he says, “real feelings, true happiness, real joy—they can’t get through that fog.”

Fear is also the subject of today’s gospel reading. In these final weeks in ordinary time, we turn our heads toward the fast-approaching season of Advent. Those who put together our lectionary (the schedule of readings for worship) provided three weeks of readings from the 25th chapter of the gospel of Matthew. In this and the preceding chapter, Jesus is speaking to his disciples, telling them stories that point to the apocalypse—the end times. Last week we heard the story of the ten virgins illustrating the need to be ready for the second coming of Christ. Next week we will hear the story of the sheep and the goats, which talks about judgment day itself. And today we have the parable of the talents.

Jesus tells the disciples of a man leaving on a long journey away from home. He entrusts to each of three slaves a large sum of money. When he finally returns home, he calls the slaves to settle accounts with him. The first two slaves have doubled the money entrusted to them. The master says, “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.”

But the third slave comes forward with only the same amount of money that he was given. He explains that, knowing that the master was a “harsh man,” his fear has caused him to bury the money so that he would be sure not to lose any of it. And as you heard, the master is displeased with this servant, calling him wicked and lazy. Interestingly, the designers of the lectionary end today’s reading at the 29th verse, before we hear the fate of the wicked slave. Verse 30 reads, “As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Yikes!

Because we know that Jesus is telling a parable about the end times, it is not hard to draw parallels to the second coming. As Jesus tells this story, he himself is a man who is preparing to entrust to his servants an extraordinary gift. He is about to leave them for a long time. He anticipates his return at some future time, in which there will be a reckoning.

What is difficult for us in this reading of the story is that the master in the parable doesn't seem Christlike. The third slave points out that the master is a harsh man, reaping where he does not sow and gathering where he does not scatter seed. The Jesus we know can hardly be described in those terms.

But I don't think that Jesus intends for us to focus on the master—in this story, what seems to matter are the actions, or the lack of action, of the slaves.

The first two slaves seem to understand the nature of the gift they are given: a talent represented work done—six thousand to ten thousand day's worth of wages, depending on which Biblical scholar you believe. These first two slaves responded to a gift of money earned in work by working to make more of it. They take a risk.

The third slave, on the other hand, operates out of fear that he might lose the money, and takes the safer route. He buries the money in order to be sure that he won't be caught short by the master.

In today's market, I find it easy to sympathize with that third slave. After all, if the first two slaves had invested in real estate or stocks and found themselves cashing out in recent months, the story might have had a much different ending.

Or would it? This is not a parable about investment policy. Instead, Jesus makes the point that the proper response to an extraordinary gift is to use it. The master is a man of extraordinary means – so much so that he can give huge sums of money to his slaves without any instructions about what they are to do with it. And when he returns, his main concern seems to be not how much money there is, but rather, what did you do with my gift?

Jesus calls on us in this story to act—to respond to the extraordinary gifts we have been given with similar action. It is not enough to possess the gift; living into God's generosity calls upon us to try to make more of it.

In these uncertain times it may seem practical to conclude that the best course of action is caution—after all, we don't know what's around the next corner, and all indicators tell us that things in the financial world will probably get worse before they get better. But Jesus reminds us in this story that this is the path of fear. Instead, we are called to remember the astonishing generosity we have received and to act in accordance.

Here at the Little Church around the Corner, we have been enormously gifted. Those who came before us built this awe-inspiring facility, a true oasis of quiet and beauty in the middle of the city. Our church was built to be a haven for all, especially for those who could not find a home elsewhere. Father Platt's well-written theological appreciation of our founder, The Rev. George Houghton, underscores Houghton's understanding that all of us are of equal worth before God—that everyone of us is the recipient of God's extraordinary gifts. And Houghton acted on this gift: in the 1860s he sheltered African-Americans in the church, protecting them from the mobs of the Draft Riots; and in 1870 he famously officiated at the funeral of actor George Holland. And ever since, this has been a place that has recognized the gifts it holds in trust and has acted upon them.

And now our congregation finds itself with new opportunities: a new rector, wonderful new facilities, new energy and commitment to take care of the treasures that have been entrusted to us. But we also find ourselves in the midst of a city that is filled with new and growing needs.

We can only begin to imagine the strain that new economic realities will bring to bear on the City of New York. Undoubtedly there will again be many knocking on our doors, looking for shelter and for comfort.

How will we respond? Will we react in fear, working only to be sure that we keep what we have? Or will we step out in faith, to continue the Little Church's legacy of service to those in need around us?

To act in faith will mean different things to each of us. The disciples must have known what it meant to respond to the gift—after all, they had heard Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, saying blessed are the poor, blessed are the peacemakers, blessed are the meek. They heard his call to feed the multitudes. He gave them—and us—so many examples of how to respond in love to the world.

For some of us, that response may be a new commitment to the work of this parish—to support it with our time, our abilities, our money. For others it may be to take up hands-on work in service to those in need. And for others it may mean being a prophetic voice in support of those unable to speak for themselves. If we will listen to God, and not allow our minds to be clouded by fear, God will lead us to a clear understanding of how we can serve a broken world.

The choice is ours. I hope that we will listen to the words of Jesus, and will dare to respond to God's gifts with brave generosity. May this congregation, this little church around the corner from the most powerful and the most needy in our country, live into its rightful name. May we be for this city the Church of the Transfiguration—a place that transfigures the ordinary into the extraordinary in witness to the many gifts we have received.

Let us choose to be people who don't live in fear, but rather in confidence that God's abundance will sustain us. Let us choose to be God's agents for a hurt and hungry city. Let us transfigure the world around us. Amen.