

November 16, 2014 ~ 33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

Beyond Fear

Matthew 25:14-30

Father Dave Mercer
Pastor, St. Thomas of Canterbury Catholic Church
San José, California

*Out of fear I went off and buried your talent
in the ground. Here it is back. [Matthew 25:25]*

Today's problem is *fear*, but first ...

I've never understood why it's so, but the movie, *The Wizard of Oz*, is always shown on television during the weeks prior to Christmas. I've never connected Dorothy to Advent or Christmas. And yet, I do associate Dorothy with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Here's how I make that connection.

Dorothy is lost in a distant land and wants to go home. She meets up with several amusing characters: Scarecrow without a brain, Tin Man without a heart, and the Lion without courage. She wants to go home, which she does, but only after she faces down the Wicked Witch and brings the witch's broom to the Wizard.

It's a great story, and it's our story, too. Like Dorothy, we can feel lost as we deal with different sides of ourselves: the head, the heart, and inner strength, or, courage. However, only when we use what makes us who we are (our head, heart, and strength) and move beyond our fears, only then do we go home, that is, only then do we realize who we truly are. Dorothy's story is our story, too.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ regularly calls us to face our fears straight on and to move beyond them. The Gospel of Jesus Christ reminds us that *fear* risks becoming an obstacle to whatever God calls us to do with our lives.

The Sunday before Christmas, we'll hear an angel tell Mary: "Do not be afraid." On Christmas Eve, we'll hear an angel tell the shepherds: "Do not be afraid." Elsewhere in the Gospels, Jesus is with his disciples in a boat during a violent storm and tells them: "Do not be afraid."

The Gospel of Jesus Christ regularly calls us to move beyond fear, because fear keeps us from loving our neighbor and whoever is difficult to love. Indeed, fear is the opposite of love.

Teenagers: here's an easy way to understand the notion of fear. First, spell it out on the fingers of one hand: F – E – A – R. Then, those letters stand for the words in a sentence: False Evidence Appearing Real. Now, I'm not saying there's never a reason to justify fear. However, when we are afraid to love those who are difficult to love, fear is often the result of faulty thinking. If there's someone in your life whom you avoid, fear at some level is likely present.

Today's Gospel proclamation calls us to move beyond fear and to devote ourselves to the Gospel of love. In today's parable, Jesus speaks of a man who entrusts his estate to his servants. He gives a rousing *Attaboy!* to the first two servants, because they weren't afraid to take a chance with what was given them. He then blows his top, because the third servant cannot move beyond his fears to take a chance at doing something with what he's been given.

Jesus doesn't want us to be ruled by fear. Jesus wants to awaken the Dorothy in each of us, calling us to confront whatever makes us afraid and to move beyond it. Like Dorothy, we then can go home, that is, we then realize who we truly are. To move beyond fear allows you and me to recognize who we truly are: a child of God, a disciple of Jesus Christ, a person with a God-given mission to love whoever comes before us.

I recall Pope Francis saying that he hopes for a church willing to make well-meaning blunders rather than playing it too safe out of fear of making mistakes. He knows that fear risks paralyzing our Church's mission to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In the early years of the Church, the Gospel message, *do not be afraid*, is important to Christians interested in taking the Gospel of love seriously. They have to move beyond fear when living the faith amid Roman pagan culture. Roman pagans think it absurd that their gods might care how we treat each other. To love even those who are not members of one's family is radically new to Roman culture.¹

In the early centuries after Jesus, when a plague hits a town, people leave in fear, leaving even sick family members behind. Those Christians who stay behind to tend to the sick are known as the *parabolani*, that is, as *risk-takers*.

We see such love today in the doctors and nurses who go to Liberia to care for Ebola patients. Motivated by love, they are *risk-takers*.

So, Jesus tells us a parable about God's love given freely to you and me. Jesus calls you and me not to hide (out of fear) what we've been given, but to be *risk-takers*, that is, to grow that love by giving it away. Fear is the opposite of love.

Like Dorothy, we find out who we are when we bring together our Scarecrow, Tin Man, and Lion (when we bring together the head, the heart, and a little courage) and move beyond our fears.

Of course, God's love for you and me is fearless. With bread and wine, we remember Jesus moving through death to life. And when we say *Amen!*, we again enter a Communion with Jesus, moving beyond fear to be united with the One-who-is-love.

That's why we choose to follow Jesus Christ.

¹ Paul Galloway, "How Jesus won the west: Christianity became dominant because it offered better ideas and unexpected mercy," *The Lutheran*, November 1998, p. 19.