If I had to name an emotion that has impacted my life more than any other, I would have to say it is fear. Fear of failure, fear of the unknown, fear of making mistakes.

Fear keeps us from doing a lot of things. What I deeply love about this parable is its reminder to live with courage. I also find it an uncomfortable passage because if I had to pick a character in this story to be, I would be the third servant who takes what they are given and then carefully hides it away. Perhaps I am not doubling or, tripling the money but, I am keeping it safe. I always feel a little over-protective of the third servant.

Theologian N.T Wright once wrote that there is always a danger that people will regard Christianity as a kind of heavenly examination system. He likens it to exams in school. "God has given us a syllabus to study, things to learn and do, rules to keep. One day he'll come and set the final examination and see who passes and who fails. Maybe there will be especially good things in store for people who get especially good marks, and likewise especially bad things for people with bad marks." After reading a parable like this today we wonder if perhaps that is in fact true. However, a complete reading of the gospel refutes an interpretation like this. We know that Jesus came to bring the good news, to heal, and to seek the lost. This parable was not a test for the servant in the traditional way we understand a test. Rather it was meant to encourage the servant to more fully engage in life.

In this passage Jesus is nearing the end of his life. He is in the middle of his own high-risk gamble. He has made the decision to leave the safety of Galilee and travel to Jerusalem, where he will surely encounter trouble with the religious authorities. He has left everything behind for this final journey. On his way to Jerusalem is he preparing his disciples for when he will no longer be with them. He will be leaving them with tasks to do, and the continuance of his ministry rests with them. This is where the parable of the talents is reframed--Jesus cannot afford to have them bury the good news. The disciples must go out into the world as best they can to share the gospel with others. They cannot let fear deter them. That is both fear of the world, and fear of doing it wrong. What would have happened if the disciples had felt they simply did not understand the message of Jesus well enough and therefore, did not share what they had been taught? What if they had been afraid of the religious and political leaders who had just crucified their friend, so they remained locked in an Upper Room reminiscing about how great Jesus was but, doing nothing with his teaching?

This parable is the third of four stories Jesus has told about the coming kingdom. A wealthy man is getting ready to go away and he calls each of his servants to him and entrusts them with extremely large amounts of money. What is interesting is that each of the servants receives a different amount--the land owner understands each of them individually and gives them amounts he feels they can handle. Just to put it into perspective, the one who received 5 talents was entrusted with what amounted to 75 years worth of day labour. Can you imagine being handed that much money? Then instead of giving each of them a detailed list on how to spend it, and outlining what they should do with it, he leaves. It is up to them to do what they think is best which is crazy when you think about it. Why were there no guidelines? When we used to leave our two dogs and cat with my parents for a weekend, I would write them a book. "Plato cat only likes his soft food if you warm it up in the microwave for 11 seconds. Rhea's favorite toy is her Nyla bone, and Darwin only likes a certain type of pillow." Their master leaves a fortune in the hands of three servants and does not even ask for a monthly report with updates. He has entrusted each of them with a gift--how are they going to receive and use that gift?

The passage does not get into too much detail with what happens next. The bottom line is that the first two servants double their investments, but the third, afraid of losing his money, decides to take a safer route. He buries it. Which seems like an odd response, but one author said that the action of the servant burying the money in the ground was not a completely uncommon action. In fact, in the first century it was viewed as a good security measure. Your money was tucked away so if robbers were to come into your house, they would not find it. It would also be safe from you spending it because it would be a complete hassle to dig it up every time you wanted to buy something--we might have to give this a try!

When the master finally returns it is time to settle accounts. There is nothing startling with the first two servants, but when he reaches the third everything changes. I have always felt bad for the third servant. One author summed it up perfectly when he said "This is not a bad man. This is a prudent, careful, cautious investor. He is not about to take chances with the money. It is all there, every penny of it, when his master returns. He is proud of himself. "Here it is. All of it safe and sound." For his efforts he is treated as harshly as anyone in the whole Bible." What is going on here? If you have been entrusted with something significant or important, and you keep it safe for the person you are looking after it for, have you not done what you are supposed to do? The problem is the third servant did not understand the master.

One writer beautifully summed up this passage with the following words "The point here is not really about doubling your money and accumulating wealth. It is about living. It is about investing. It is about taking risks. It is about Jesus himself and what he has done and what is about to happen to him. Mostly it is about what he hopes and expects of them after he is gone. It is about being a follower of Jesus and what it means to be faithful to him, and so, finally, it is about you and me. The greatest risk of all, it turns out, is not to risk anything, not to care deeply and profoundly enough about anything to invest deeply, to give your heart away and in the process risk everything. The greatest risk of all, it turns out, is to play it safe, to live cautiously and prudently." Through that lens the harsh rebuke of the third servant finally makes sense.

Paul has a line that is essentially the motto of my life, he wrote in Romans "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do." How true is that in our lives? We are apt to hold onto the talent given even when we know we shouldn't. We have a sense of what we should be doing yet we hesitate. "We bury too much goodness, time, love, treasure, and talent in the ground." I subscribe to a newsletter that the Smithsonian sends out and it often covers stories about metal detecting enthusiasts who find large buried troves of treasure, especially in England and the surrounding areas. I always wonder who buried it and why? Did they hope to come back one day? I believe that is a safe assumption. It always strikes me as a sad story, certainly not for the treasure hunter but, for the person who so carefully hide such riches in the ground never to return to them. Instead these priceless artifacts weather and rust beneath the earth and elements, some never to see the light of day again.

Why do we hide our talents? Maybe some of us feel that our talent is too small to share. Perhaps we wish we had another's talent instead of our own and we find ourselves thinking "if I only had theirs it would be so much easier." In the parable today it was the servant's fear of the master that paralyzed them. Even though the master freely entrusted them with fifteen years worth of a labourers pay, they did not trust him. If the master was worried about losing it, He would not have given it. Instead the master wanted to see them flourish, not hide in fear.

It's hard isn't it? We live in an age where we are constantly being reminded of the church's challenges. Aging demographics, a dwindling list of volunteers, an increasingly secular society, aging buildings--we know the story of fear all too well. It makes us want to hold on to what we have even tighter. It makes us feel like we are backed into a corner and have no hope. But the parable today reminds us that is not the truth--we are to have courage.

The heart of this passage is not about money or who made the most--it is about having enough courage to be faithful with what God has given us. Jesus calls us to be his disciples, to live out our lives as fully as possible, to take risks, and expand the horizons of our responsibility. It is about the use and investment of these precious lives of ours, and to be bold and brave, to reach high, and care deeply. "This parable is the invitation to the adventure of faith--the high-risk venture of being a disciple of Jesus Christ." God reminds us not to be afraid, but rather to take risks for His sake. Sometimes they will work and sometimes they won't but, that is okay. This is not about doing things perfectly; it is about being faithful stewards.

My prayer for us today is that we continually ask ourselves what does it mean to be faithful with what we have been given? What does it mean to live with courage? Where in our lives is fear holding us back? Then let us find strength through the love of God who has entrusted us with the greatest treasure of all to live out our call boldly and practice stewardship with courage.