

Fear Is Not How You Steward Anything

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[0 : 00] Well, I feel after the spoken word and Brittany's prayer and the amazing liturgy, a little superfluous this morning, which is good because I'm going to be talking about the stewardship of sexuality, which we all know is a very light topic and I should be able to get this done within the next two hours.

So we're going to fix it. I'm going to take, wait, wait, only about 25 minutes. Okay. Honestly, we've been doing this incredible series where we've been talking about how we carry things, what we carry in, how we should carry things going forward.

And here I get to talk about sexuality, which is not a light topic, especially in terms of the way the church has carried it. And to be honest, I think a 25 minute sermon is not enough space for this. My pitch is that we should do a summer of sexuality pretty much because the fall of fornication doesn't really sound as good. But honestly, I think we should get Richard Kelly and he should do a seven week series on what the Bible really says about homosexuality.

We should bring Pastor Tanetta in. She should do a 10 week workshop on creating a sexual ethic that is rooted improvisation. You know, see, I'm going to use that great word that we, right.

[1 : 18] I think we should bring in Table Church alum Brandon Robertson and he should come and talk about the querying of Christianity and how important that is. And I think, plug for myself, that I should do a 10 week sort of group therapy course where we talk about recovering from purity culture.

But even if we did all of that, I'm going to promise you that's not enough, right. And yet, I can't keep you here until five today. So we're going to talk about this. We're going to do some things.

I'm going to be a little bit vulnerable with you in the process. But I hope you just can really engage with me, especially right now, because I'm going to ask you questions. This is the sort of interactive portion of the sermon and we'll save the pop quiz till the end.

But I want to ask you about a particular scripture. How many of you have all heard the parable of the talents? Anybody? Yeah, yeah, yeah. Okay. When you've heard that taught on, what are some of the themes that come out of that?

What are some of the things that we're taught? Stewardship. Stewardship. All right. Specifically, what kind of stewardship? Finances. Yeah. Okay.

[2 : 26] In this story, like, because basically, somebody said something else? Nope. Okay. In this story, we have sort of a master and we have some servants. In this story, who are we told that we are?

The servants, right? And who are we told the master is? Okay. So essentially, we have the capacity to be one of the servants, either the good servant or the wicked one. And we have to be held accountable for what we are given.

So either finances or gifts. Master goes away. And when he comes back, he's going to hold us accountable for what we did or did not do with what we were given. Right? Right? And the master is sort of God.

Am I essentially telling you what people have told you about this scripture before? Okay. We're going to read that scripture. But I promise you, I'm not going to talk about it like that. So if you want, hop on table.center and the scriptures are there and there's some other things that you can kind of follow along as I talk today.

So let's start. It's in Matthew 25, verses 14 to 30. I'm going to read it from the NIV. And in this, they use the term bags of gold instead of talents.

[3 : 37] But it is a Greek word, talent. And let me just give like a brief context. Talent is not just a little bit of money. One talent is the equivalent of about 15 to 20 years worth of wages for a laborer.

Like we're not talking small amounts of money here. Lots of money. So a talent is what in the NIV is talked about as a bag of gold. So here we go. Okay. So again, it would be like a man going on a journey who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them.

To one, he gave five bags of gold, to another two bags, and to another one bag, each according to their ability. Fun fact, depending on your translation, if you go back to the word, ability is not kind of the real translation of this.

It's more like capacity. Okay? So something to know. Then he went on his journey. The man who had received five bags of gold went at once and put his money to work and gained five bags more. So also, the man with two bags ran right off and gained two more. But the man who had received one bag went off, dug a hole in the ground, and hid his master's money. After a long time, the master of these servants returned and settled accounts with them.

[4 : 47] The man who had received five bags of gold brought the other five. Master, he said, see you entrusted me with five bags and I have gained five more. This master replied, well done. Good and faithful servant. You've been faithful with a few things.

I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share in your master's happiness. And then the man with two bags of gold came and said, master, you entrusted me with two bags. See, I have gained two more. And his master replied, well done.

Good and faithful servant. You have been faithful with a few things. I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share in your master's happiness. The master who received one bag came and said, master, I know that you are a hard man.

Harvesting where you have not sown. Gathering where you have not scattered seed. See, I was afraid and I went out and I hid your gold in the ground. See, here's what belongs to you.

And his master replied, you wicked, lazy servant. You knew that I harvested where I have not sown and gathered where I have not scattered seed. Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the banker so that when I returned, I would have at least received it back with interest.

[5 : 53] So take the bag of gold from him and give it to the one who has 10 bags. Listen, this is a very important phrase. For whoever has been given more, they will have an abundance.

But whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. And throw that worthless servant outside into the darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Now, I think this is kind of a triggering scripture. And so you might be wondering why I'm using it today. Here's my argument. I don't think we've been given good interpretation of the scripture.

And I want to make a little bit of a case for this. I'm not going to talk about this how we normally talk about this. I want to challenge some of the assumptions we have around this story. And the first one talks about context.

This scripture comes after Jesus has had the triumphal entry into Jerusalem before he's crucified. It comes after he's had the conversation where he says, hey, this temple is going to be torn down and I will rebuild it in three days.

[6 : 56] It's talking in line about three different parables that are talking about what things are like when somebody is gone, including the parable of the virgins. And this comes kind of in a context that we are not putting on it.

If we think about this parable, it is quite likely that this is not a discipleship parable as much as it is a conversation about empire and faith in the middle of empire and what things are going to be like when Jesus is gone.

And it's likely that the people who were hearing it could have seen the master as one of the Roman leaders or even King Herod instead of it being attributed to being God or Jesus.

This may not be as prescriptive as we think it is as much as it is descriptive of what might happen when you interact with empire.

And part of the reason I think that is some of what we're seeing here. And we talked about the money, right? Money is a big piece of this. A talent being approximately 20 years of wage for a laborer.

[8 : 03] This is generational investable wealth. This is life-changing wealth. This isn't survival money. Which, if we listen to who the master is described as, it could quite possibly be exploitative money.

This is money that gets invested and chances taken on it so it moves. This is not just, I'm giving you \$10,000 to kind of help you with your little startup. This is big money, right?

Second of all, what the servant does by burying the money is actually a culturally appropriate way of safeguarding legally money and guarding your responsibilities if that goes missing.

It is not a spur of the moment freak out. I'm going to go bury the money. It is actually kind of a prudent and reasonable with legal covering kind of response.

And also, I'm going to go back to this last phrase that was in here when we talk about money. I'm going to ask you, how does this seem to measure up with how we understand the kingdom of God working?

[9 : 15] That one who has will get more, and whoever has not, even what they have will be taken. It's kind of an interesting way to think about this because that is the antithesis of a lot of what Jesus says around giving to the poor, or blessing those who curse you, or honoring the widow's might, or a lot of different things about wealth, selling all you have and giving to the poor.

Jesus, if this is the master that is supposed to be God in this, he's saying, listen, whoever doesn't have anything, even that's going to be taken. That's not a kingdom principle, right? So that means maybe we need to be interpreting the story a little differently, right?

Especially looking at how the master is described. The servant who engages with him, engages with him because of fear that has been inspired.

He says, you've harvested what isn't yours. You take credit for the things you didn't do. And because of this, I was afraid. And the master doesn't even dispute this, but owns the description. Owns that he was a hard master. And with that description, it's almost exploitative behavior. Which we have to ask ourselves as we're interpreting that, is that something that we should be interpreting as the character of God?

[10 : 37] The God shown up as Jesus, demonstrated by the one who heals the sick or fed the multitudes, right? I ask this because I think that we need to question some of the things in this story.

I think we need to question that this isn't prescriptive of how we're supposed to behave, but it shows us a picture of what can be if fear is the motivator. If we revisit this scripture, not as a God in us, but with this different perspective, we can see things differently.

The two servants who were given more immediately went away and did something with the money. But the wicked and lazy, quote unquote, servant went and buried 20 years worth of wages.

And who knows what that was compared to what he actually got paid in his position, if he got paid at all. This may have been an incredibly overwhelming sum even to begin with.

And he was so afraid of what might happen to him if he lost it. He did everything he could to keep that legally safe. And I really wonder what the difference is between the two servants who saw the master and were able to go out and do things, and the one who went and buried it.

[11 : 52] Because in my opinion, fear, legitimate existential fear, kept this servant from doing anything with that money.

It limited his ability to trust how the master would respond to his failure. It hindered his ability to imagine possibilities. And it limited what choices he thought he had.

And it probably affected every day of his life until the master came back. It was constricting. And what it led to was condemnation and exclusion.

His response is not a surprise to me. In my job, I work with people who have been exposed to a lot of trauma over long periods of time. And even, like, little bits of fear can affect the way our brain works, right?

We've talked sometimes about, like, in a moment when it's, like, extreme stress, our body goes into fight or flight or fawn or freeze. It inhibits our ability to think creatively, to problem solve.

[13 : 00] We just move quickly because that part of our brain gets shut off. And long-term trauma, prolonged trauma, wires into the way a brain functions different ways of responding.

It rewires the way a brain acts. It limits problem-solving abilities and the ability to think about future consequences beyond this immediate experience.

It produces heightened emotional responses and vastly limits the ability to dream or imagine. I'm just going to pause and put a plug in here for a program called Project Create.

If you ever want to donate or work with an organization in the D.C. area, Project Create is a great one. They use art and artisans and art therapists to go into family shelters and have programs with children.

Because one of the things that happens when you are very young and you are exposed to trauma, the ability to imagine and be creative gets greatly restricted in the way your brain is formed.

[14 : 04] And so this organization goes in and tries all these different things to help kids be able to play creatively, to be imaginative, to experience creative arts because of that very thing to help build that.

So if you want to do that, Project Create, look them up online, they're amazing. Okay, sorry, side issue. When I look at the story of this servant, I immediately see the servant through this lens. That fear and trauma limit his ability to see beyond this crisis and being not able to take a chance on anything beyond safety in this moment.

Now I'm hearing all of you go, okay, we're talking with you so far, but what does this have to do with the stewardship of sexuality? Very glad you asked. The thing is, and I think we saw this in the stories that came out today, in what Jess shared, in what our poetry was, in what Brittany shared. Fear is a horrible tactic for inspiring stewardship. Fear and the tools that go with it, shame and condemnation and control, create limitations and cause damage.

[15 : 22] The things that we are taught to hold with fear, either explicitly or implicitly, are not the things that thrive and live in freedom. They are the things that are hidden away and brushed under a rug, or sent away to a special home, or quietly married off, or told to remain celibate.

Fear stifles the ability to live an abundant life, a life to the full, like Jesus said he came to give us. And this is especially true when it comes to sexuality.

And yet, shock to no one, when it comes to sexuality, the church writ large has just leaned wholesale into these tools of fear and shame and condemnation and control.

And it colors the way we talk, or we don't talk, about our sexuality, the way we police sexuality. It governs the way we cloak sexuality in the language of purity or sacrifice.

And it defines what is acceptable, and what is sin. My argument is that communities of the Christian faith have done such a poor job of engaging healthily with sexuality that for every one positive story I hear, I hear 10 stories of damage.

[16 : 45] We talk too much about sex, and not enough. We talk a lot about what is and is not permitted, and not a lot about ethics. We talk a lot about what is sinful, and not a lot about pleasure and consent.

We talk a lot about what you can or should or where you can't have sex, but not a lot about how, or what roles sex play in mental health and physical well-being, and the health of relationships, and in growing intimacy.

We talk a lot about gender roles and sexual orientation, but very little about power dynamics and mutuality. We talk in euphemism and spiritual metaphor and cringe away from the frank and the open.

And what has become increasingly more mainstream is a high-control, fear-driven binary of right or wrong around sexuality that leaves a lot of damage in its wake.

Emotional damage, spiritual damage, abuse, and sexual dysfunction are hallmarks of the way we've held our sexuality. And the damage isn't exclusive to those who fall outside of the church teaching.

[17 : 55] Even for those who have followed the accepted path and waited until marriage for sex have paid a high price for the cost of our poor stewardship of sexuality because it inhibits the ability to trust and be vulnerable and be intimate.

If you want to see any receipts on this, I highly recommend, go check out Sheila Gregoire's book, *The Great Sex Rescue*, where she and her research team interviewed 10,000 evangelical women who were married.

And they find all kinds of things, including that women in heterosexual marriages within the evangelical church have double the rates of pain during sex as in the national population, find many other findings too, including increased struggles with intimacy and higher rates of autoimmune disorders among women who come in the evangelical church.

There are receipts that show everybody pays the price. The way we've engaged with sex and sexuality within Christianity is the cause of a lot of spiritual and emotional and physical baggage that many of us across the board carry.

And here on this Sunday before we celebrate Pride, I am all the more aware of it, especially as it pertains to those of us who are queer. Because like we saw in the parable, fear-based and shame-based approaches to sexuality do not lead to free living.

[19 : 20] It doesn't build trust. It doesn't foster intimacy. And it is everything that is opposite of what we have been taught about what love is meant to be. I've heard story after story, even from my own life, where the way we've carried sexuality has damaged relationships, caused emotional and physical harm, and left people isolated or with impossible choices.

Do I protect the wealth given to me or do I receive the wrath of my master for losing it? Do I live in celibacy or do I live in eternal separation from the God I love?

Impossible choices. But here's the thing. I think we all forget all the time. Sex and sexuality existed before sin.

In and of itself, sexuality is not something inherently sinful that has to be controlled or condemned. Stewardship of sexuality that brings fullness and thriving needs to pivot away from the fear and shame and towards something more healthy and more life-giving.

To give you an illustration of this, I'm going to take you into a little bit of my own journey with sexuality. I'm sure I've mentioned this before in a sermon, but it's been a while since I preached, so apologies if I have.

[20 : 49] But I tend to do weird things for Lent. I think Lent is meant to be a time where I make a choice to focus on something that has the power to change me, to resurrect something, or to restore something.

One year, I gave up being a Protestant for Lent, and I went to the Catholic Church four times a week for Mass. That was interesting. One year, I gave up three lies I believed about myself.

That was an adventure. A couple of years ago, I was 49 and approaching my 50th birthday, and I thought, you know what I need to do for Lent? Is I need to name all the things that I thought should have been in my life right now, make space and grieve them, so that I can dream about what the possibility is for the next part of my life.

I want to name a couple things with this. Doing this meant I had to be leaning into the possible. And fear and shame really inhibit the ability to imagine possibility.

I really believe that I never would have been able to do this if I wasn't in this community, if I wasn't in this place. Ten years before that, when I was coming up on 40, I was still in a very high-control evangelical church, some very binary beliefs, some very strong fear-based conversations about sex and sexuality and other things.

[22 : 16] And I could never have done this there. But being a part of this community of faith and with the friendship and support that I found living here in D.C., that's part of what made this possible.

Couldn't have done this before. Also, I want to just flag that this was a very ambitious Lent activity. I did not get it done in Lent. And it took over a year to work through because there were a lot of things that went on.

So I'm not going to really go into that part of the story, but if you want to know more about it, let's get a drink and I will wax lyrical about how angry I got for a very long time. But one of the major pieces of this journey for me was letting go of my narrow expectation of marriage and family.

I was 49 years old, staring down my 50th birthday. A single woman, no children. Everything that I had been taught about sex and sexuality is you wait until marriage.

Marriage is where sex happens and it's glorious. We all know what I really think about that now. But that's the things that I had been taught, right?

[23 : 26] But it was internalized as this is what God, this is God's gold standard way of being, right? And here I was, I am probably never going to have my own child.

So how does that change that dream of being a mom and a wife? How does that change that idea that this is where my life is supposed to go?

And I had to rethink about the role of sex in my life. When everything I had been taught had been limited to marriage and family, I needed to think about what the change of this expectation being let go meant for me.

Does this mean, according to the evangelical way of things, that I would never have sex? Does this mean that I, what?

Like, what is this? Am I on me alone forever? Like, what is this, right? And I had the opportunity to think about my sexuality differently and how I engaged with who I was outside of this expectation.

[24 : 32] So I did a lot of reading and thinking and praying and I worked to explore Christian sexual ethics outside of purity culture and worked on growing as an ally for my LGBTQIA siblings and

unpacking what I had been taught about sex and learning about pleasure and owning it and learning about all these different pieces and packing my fear and judgment around sex and my understanding of it, understanding of attraction and orientation and red lights and green lights and relationships and needs and desires and neurobiology and all this kind of stuff.

And I began to understand some new things about myself. And the first is, I learned a lot about how I was wired. I was able to clarify more what I want, what I am looking for, not just that binary of what I'm supposed to be looking for.

I was able to look at what works for who I am and not just what I should have. I joke a lot now about what I want is a partner and we have duplexes with a door that joins them in the middle.

So I can still have my own space and they can still have their own space, but we can have space together. I think that would be brilliant. That would work really well. Another whole story. Yes, thank you. The other thing is, I began to develop a sexual ethic that wasn't fear-based, but was rooted in a more just and beautiful and liberative understanding of the gospel.

And that was significant for me. We'll talk about that a little bit in a minute. The other thing that I learned was language about my own desires and understandings. And I began to realize in the middle of this that contrary to what I thought, not all the other girls also go, oh, that girl is cute.

[26 : 15] Like I go, oh, that girl is cute. And I began to realize that I actually do like men and women and I, is this, am I bisexual? Like it was a whole thing.

Whole thing. So I had sat with that for a minute and then it was in an elder meeting or following an elder meeting or something. We were talking about something and I realized, oh, I need to let Anthony know about this.

So Anthony was one of the first people that I like came out to, came out to. And I was like, oh yeah.

So I'm like, I need to tell you this is about me. And he was like, wow, that's a big revelation.

Like, how do you like, finally he asked me like, how are you feeling? Like, how do you feel with this?

And I had to think about it for a minute and I said, you know, it doesn't change very much. It's kind of a moot point because I'm still kind of trying to work out what this means for me and like everything.

But I think I can breathe deeper. Like I have this ability to breathe more fully. And to me, this is one of the most important parts about this conversation about how we carry in stewardship sexuality.

[27 : 21] The stewardship of our sexuality should not be constricting and condemning. It should be liberative. It should be allowing us to breathe more fully and thrive in who we were created to be and in relationship with ourselves, in relationship with others, in relationship to God.

We see a glimpse of this in the parable. There was something about how the first two servants understood and saw the master. It allowed them to trust and dream that the moment they were given the money, they immediately knew what they were going to do with it.

Something about the, something the other servant, the quote unquote wicked servant, was unable to do. So I asked the question, if fear and control and orienting around sin is not producing healthy relationships with sexuality in ourselves, in our relationships with others, then maybe we need to reorient.

See if there's a different way to view things. So I'm going to suggest some things that we need to reorient in relationship to. And the first thing I think we need is to reorient around God and the gospel.

And I'm wondering, what are those rooted places that allow us to improvise and live fully in our sex and sexuality? One of the things that I came across and some of the reading I had was, can we go back to the greatest commandment?

[28 : 48] Love God, love others as we love ourselves, right? And what if sexual ethics were based in love, right? Loving to others, loving to ourselves.

Is this loving towards God and the creations that God has done with all God's people, right? And maybe some other pieces of that that we see written all over the gospel are conversations about freedom and liberation.

What would it be like if our sexuality was rooted in those things? Or when Jesus says, I have come to give you life, abundant life to the full, right?

What if our sex and sexuality was oriented around wholeness and abundance rather than restriction, coercion, control?

I think when we start to do these things, it sets hard limits on things that should have hard limits like injustice and exploitation and predation and harm.

[29 : 51] All of those things are not loving towards God, towards each other, towards ourselves. It's not based in wholeness. It's not based in abundance. It's not based in liberation or freedom. But, oh, and my thing went right up to the beginning.

I got to go back to where I was. But, so sorry, y'all. One of the things that if we do build in there, this leaves room for exploration and joy.

It leaves room for true consent and mutuality. It leaves room for intimacy and passion and trust without ever having to set binary boundaries or insistence on traditional values.

I also argue that we need to reorient our understanding of sex and sexuality. Like I said before, human sexuality existed before sin. It's part of the way that we were designed in the image of God. And maybe part of our reorientation is moving from this ingrained belief that certain things are sinful and need to be controlled and more towards an understanding that sexuality is a gift to be used well.

[31 : 09] I also think we need to reorient around the way we've been taught to see ourselves. Especially if we don't match what is biblically sanctioned. I don't know about how many of you, but I don't know.

I've seen skits where it's a crumpled road, a chewed up piece of gum, damaged goods, something to be fixed. And let me just say that, you are not any of those things.

Our sexuality is something that is beautiful and who we are is loved. So I think when we talk about this, we need to also think about the way we integrate sexuality into our faith communities.

We have to think a little bit about what we want to build for ourselves and the people that come into our community and those that come after us. As a church, as this church, we have been very vocal about a more beautiful gospel for me and my queer siblings.

But there is so much beyond that. We need to start asking ourselves, how do we talk about marriage and sex and implicit or explicit expectations around relationships and that.

[32 : 22] We need to talk more about what consent is and commitment in there. We also need to have conversations around sexual debuts beyond expectations of virginity, right?

And we also need to empower ourselves and the kids we're in community with to have healthy relationships with our own and their own sexualities and relationships with others.

Now this is a tall order. Again, I do not have four hours today. Also do not have everybody's experience here. Do not have all the answers. But I really want to invite us to think about this as we steward going forward.

This beautiful gift of sexuality, how do we steward it in a way that is life-giving and sustainable? And my hope is that as a community, we can come out of all the fear and control and some of us already have and that is something to celebrate for.

But to imagine together a different way. And so to that end, I have two challenges for us. I have an individual challenge and a community challenge before we pray and go into communion.

[33 : 33] First of all, I want to ask you to think, where do you need to reorient as it comes to sexuality? Do you need to reorient the way you see God?

Do you need to reorient the way you see sex and sexuality? Or do you need to reorient the way you see yourself in light of that? That's my first question.

And as a community, I'm going to ask something for us to think about that I hope becomes a part of a bigger conversation longer term. As a community, how do we foster an approach to sexuality that is healthy and loving?

Not only healing and freeing for those who carry damage and baggage, but creates a different place for those we're raising and making space for. Okay.

Let's pray. God, I thank you that you are a God of life and love and infinite creativity. Thank you that you are the God that made each of us in your image, in all the many fractals and splendors and beauties that we are.

[34 : 47] Lord, we ask that you help us pivot the way that we've seen ourselves and seen you and seen sexuality in the past and find a way forward that is rooted in improvisation, rooted in you, but free to encompass the beauty and the splendor and the vastness of your creation.

We pray that as we take this journey together that you give us joy and life and love as we explore this. In your name we pray. Amen.