

## ***Our Hidden Fears***

Sunday, November 19, 2023

Matthew 25:14-30

Psalm 90:1-12

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*Living faithfully means gaining a heart of wisdom by making each day count.*

“Teach us to number our days,” the Psalmist prays. But what are we supposed to be counting?

On Thursday, just four days from now, we gather to count our blessings, which is a whole lot more fun than counting carbs or calories. We will count the blessings of family and friends, recalling stories about the year the kids couldn't quite pronounce “TH” sounds so our dinner became Thanksgiving. We'll count the number of Christmas cards we get, or the amount of money we will spend. We will count how many rolls are left after they were passed, and how many pieces of pie we can eat. We will count place settings as we set the table, and carefully watch the minutes the turkey has been browning.

We indeed number our days – we know that it takes about four days for a 22-pound turkey to safely thaw in the refrigerator, and that making grandma's ambrosia salad requires at least 24 hours. We know that beginning tomorrow afternoon, the lines at the grocery store and at the airport will both be interminable. We will count the hours before our loved ones arrive. If you are staying at a relative's house, you'll spend the night counting the number of springs poking you in the sofa bed.

These are the things that seem to count – to matter, to make a difference. But there are other ways we track our days.

We might also try counting the number of days since the war in Ukraine began (635), or the number of days since Hamas attacked Israel (just 43). We know that thousands have been killed, and that at least 240 persons are being held hostage. There are, by last count, at least 32 armed conflicts occurring in the world today.

Or perhaps the Psalmist really means for us to track the number of days that we live. The average lifespan for an adult in the United States is about 27,375. That does not sound like a whole lot of time, until you do the math and realize quite a few of you are indeed above average!

College students count the number of days before a project is due or before graduation arrives. Their parents will count the number of days before the kids go back to school. Some will count the days before retirement, or track the number of days before they are married. A friend recounted how her father kept track of the number of days he had been sober. A light on my dashboard tells me its time to get an oil change.

The Psalmist says, “Lord teach us to number our days,” but the plain truth is we’re not given a formula or even told what to count.

For some of us, our deepest hidden fears have to do with counting. I’m not talking about those anxiety dreams where you dream that you are back in high school and you discover you’ve missed an entire semester of algebra. You show up for the final exam and the teacher smiles sarcastically while saying, “Good luck.” I won’t say that I have these dreams frequently, but the last time the teacher was one of our Woodlawn Chapel college students.

I can identify with the story on the Internet of a third grader who was struggling with a word problem on a math test. The question read, “If there are 36 kids at the beach, and 28 more arrive, how many kids are on the beach?” It’s exactly the kind of question that would have distracted me because I would have wondered how many of them were eating hot dogs. Anyway, the question stumped the student who simply wrote, “Too many for Covid!”

If numbers create anxiety within us, calling us to pay close attention to our hidden fears, then perhaps we may be close to understanding the message these scriptures hold for us. It is possible that most of the time, we count our days not from a deep sense of trust but from fear.

This is the message of these stories. In Matthew, we’re reminded that the church, you and I, are called to the great adventure of faith. We are called to take what has been given to us and use it with joy and delight. Likewise, the Psalm reminds us that our lives are indeed hard and filled with struggle, but they are framed by the magnificence of God. To count our days means we express our delight and trust in God who has given them to us.

Psalm 90 begins with a rather pessimistic view of the span of our lives. It is framed by a prayer marveling at God’s eternal presence, but quickly shifts to considering the

brevity and struggles of life. It begins with awe and wonder, and then moves to a brutal reality. Life, as psychiatrist Scott Peck wrote in the 1970s,<sup>1</sup> is difficult.

And indeed, it is.

The Psalmist is aware of that, and notes that our lives are filled with terror and struggle. He might have said, “Tylenol and night sweats.” But there is something else: in this struggle there is the promise that God will use the work of our hands. And so, the Psalmist prays, “Lord teach us to number our days.”

This is the sort of math Jesus suggests to us, and exactly the sort of word problems we ought to be doing around our Thanksgiving tables. Remember that the English word “talent” meant something different in the New Testament world. A talent was not a skill or an ability, but an astonishing amount of money. It was at least 20 years of wages. Jesus, of course, had a strange way of doing math. He talks about a shepherd who leaves behind 99 responsible sheep for the one who doesn’t follow directions. He speaks of the “first shall become last,” and then tells us this tale of a man who entrusts his enormous wealth to three of his servants.

One gets three million bucks. The second gets about 1.5 million, and the third around \$500,000. Remember, I’m not good at math. But the point is: they are given according to their ability.

We like to call the One Talent guy “Woeful Willard,” or “Billy Not So Bright.” We make fun of the way he hides his talent and see him as flawed. The others are the bright whiz kids who breezed through business school. They’re talented and smart and make wise investments.

But that is not the point. Jesus says they are given each according to their ability.

The one talent guy is not dumb. He takes steps to protect his master’s money. He knows that any investment is subject to market conditions, so he does what seems sensible. He buries the treasure.

The guy is not dumb, but he is afraid. He has failed to understand who his master really is. The boss entrusted him with an enormous gift. Yet in his fear, he takes it and hides it. He forgets what it means to live with the gift that he has been given. It me of a quote from Brene Brown, “There are too many people in the world today who decide to live disappointed rather than risk feeling disappointment.” Our hidden fears keep us

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<sup>1</sup> M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Travelled* (1978).

from discovering God's gifts of courage and wisdom. Life is indeed hard, but we discover God's wisdom by recalling that God has entrusted us with astonishing gifts.

This is what it means to make our days count. Martin Luther once said that a better translation of Psalm 90 would be, "teach us to reflect that we must die, so that we become wise." The one talent man fell into a trap of his own creating: a trap of fear and a failure to trust.

God has entrusted us with these blessings. God is our true home, the Psalmist tells us. For that reason, we shall not fear—but rather, we will embrace the gifts given to us, and use them for God's glory. Amen.