November 15, 2026

Matthew 25:14-30 "Don't Bury It"

As I've told you in the past, some pastors, including myself, use the Revised Common Lectionary to prepare our sermons. Each week we get at least four passages of Scripture to choose from – Old Testament, Gospels, Epistles, and a Psalm. Critics of the Lectionary say that it stifles the work of the Holy Spirit. Proponents of the Lectionary say that it keeps you from just preaching your favorite texts by giving you scriptures that you might skip over if you had the choice. But the work of the spirit can definitely occur when a preacher is forced to deal with a text that is as difficult as the one that Georgeanne just read. But I like the challenging texts. The weirder the better for me, and the parable of the talents scores pretty high on my weird-o-meter.

You think last week's text with the sleepy bridesmaids and the cranky groom was tough? This week we've got a wealthy, ill-tempered slave-owning master who, after he announces he's going on a journey, gives his slaves enormous amounts of money, and then gets furious when one of them doesn't make him richer. If you're having a tough time trying to figure out which character you're supposed to admire, you are not alone my friend! But here's something I want you to remember -- parables aren't always stories about people that we're supposed to imitate. Think about this -- Some of the best and most compelling TV series have the worst, unlikable characters. *Mad Men*, *Breaking Bad*, *Seinfeld*, *The Bear* … just about any of those cringe comedy shows like *The Office*, or *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*. They're about people who behave badly and make horrible decisions. And yet there are so many good lessons to be learned – sometimes at the *expense* of these unlikable characters. It's almost like the stories are designed to *make* us uncomfortable so we can ask better questions.

So it is with this passage from Matthew 25. These absurd people who are exhibiting absurd behavior are all lined up for Jesus to teach his disciples about what the kingdom of God is like. So, according to

Matthew's gospel, what *does* Jesus say the kingdom of God is like? Well, last week, five bridesmaids got locked out of a banquet hall in the dark of night because they didn't bring extra oil for their lamps which, by the way, they were not required or even expected to do. This week, we've got a "worthless slave" who is thrown into the "outer darkness" where there is "weeping and gnashing of teeth." If you think this Kingdom of God sounds a little sketchy, wait until next week when yet another wealthy, powerful grouch wants to send a bunch of goats to burn in an eternal fire. I've got a few things to say about that one, but it will have to wait until next Sunday.

The traditional interpretation of this week's parable is, "Are you making the most of your God-given talents?" And maybe that's what you'd expect on the Sunday when pledge cards are due, and we elect our church leaders. But I want to consider an alternative interpretation. This week we have a wealthy landowner who goes on a journey, but before he leaves, he entrusts three of his slaves with varying amounts of money. Slave number one gets five talents. Slave number two gets two talents. Slave number three gets one talent. Without being told, two of them go out and invest the money they'd been given. One buried his talent in the ground for safekeeping because even one talent is a ridiculous amount of money. Better to keep it safe, right? But when the master got back, boy howdy, did we see a side of this guy that we weren't expecting. He gave the two slaves who invested the money all sorts of praise for doing so. But the slave who just wanted to keep the money safe is called wicked and lazy. The master says, "You should've known better!" Really? Because I sure didn't hear him say, "Y'all go out and invest this money while I'm gone." Then the talent that this poor slave kept safe was taken away from him and given to the first slave who doubled his investment. If this all wasn't bad enough, this slave who was already having a bad day was unceremoniously thrown out into the outer darkness away from the safety of this ogre's property. Can you imagine teaching this lesson to a bunch of third graders in Sunday School? What kind of flannel board scene would you create that wouldn't send the kids home crying? But again, parables don't have to be about likable people living in ideal

circumstances. We can learn valuable lessons even from stories about enormously harsh, enormously wealthy landowners who arbitrarily reward and punish their slaves.

So then let's take a peek at something that gets overlooked in this parable. *Why* did the third slave bury his money? Because he was afraid. And why was he afraid? Because his master was harsh. Sometimes we want to make this slave the villain of this story because we jump to the conclusion that the harsh landowner somehow represents God.

Let's set that aside for a moment. Instead, let's consider what the third slave actually says. "I was afraid." And frankly, who could blame him? Here's a guy who has absolutely no control over his circumstances. He's enslaved to a wealthy landowner who apparently has a reputation for being a pretty unpleasant fellow. And then, without much explanation, this master hands him an extraordinary amount of money and leaves town. Now, keep in mind that a talent wasn't a special ability like singing, playing the piano, or knowing how to fix a leaky faucet. A talent was a unit of money. And one talent represented something like fifteen to twenty years of wages for an ordinary laborer. That's a lot of money! Especially for someone who doesn't have any money of his own.

So imagine being in this guy's position. Your master has just handed you more money than you've ever held in your hands. You know what kind of temper he has. You know what might happen if you lose it. You were given no instructions on what to do with it, and you have no idea when he's coming back. What would you do? I don't know about you, but I might start looking for a shovel! And here's something else. Burying money wasn't necessarily considered foolish in the ancient world. If you wanted to keep something valuable safe from thieves, hiding it in the ground was a perfectly reasonable thing to do. So, the third slave isn't being careless. Quite the opposite. He's being amazingly careful. He doesn't steal the money. He doesn't spend it. He doesn't lose a penny. When his master returns, he can hand back exactly what he was given. And in his mind, he's probably thinking, "Mission accomplished! I kept

it safe!" But that's where this parable raises an interesting question. **Is protecting something always the same as being faithful to it?**

Think about that for a minute. We all have things in our lives that we value and want to protect. Our families. Our friendships. Our financial security. Our traditions. Our reputations. And there's absolutely nothing wrong with wanting to take care of those things. But sometimes our desire to protect something becomes so powerful that we're afraid to do anything with it. We don't want to risk damaging a friendship, so we avoid having an honest conversation. We don't want to embarrass ourselves, so we never try learning something new.

We don't want to make a mistake, so we put off making a decision. We don't want to fail, so we convince ourselves it's better not to try. And the interesting thing is that we can make all those decisions while telling ourselves that we're being responsible. We're being careful. We're being practical. We're being realistic. And sometimes we are! But sometimes we're just afraid. And fear has a funny way of disguising itself as good judgment. Churches are especially good at this.
We have buildings that need to be maintained. Money that needs to be managed. Traditions that mean a great deal to people. Ministries that have been handed down from one generation to the next. And we have a responsibility to take good care of all those things. But what happens when taking care of them becomes more important than remembering why we have them in the first place? What happens when we're so concerned about preserving our resources that we're reluctant to use them? Or when we're so afraid of upsetting someone that we stop trying anything new? Or when we're so worried about what might go wrong that we forget to imagine what might go right?

Now, I'm not suggesting that every idea is a good idea or that every risk is worth taking. Sometimes the wisest thing we can do is say no. Sometimes protecting what we have really *is* the responsible thing to do. But I wonder how often we make those decisions because we've carefully considered the possibilities, or how often we make them

because we're afraid. There's a difference. And maybe one way to recognize that difference is to ask ourselves a simple question:
"Have we become so focused on protecting what we *have* that we've forgotten what it's *for*?"

A church building isn't just something to maintain. It's a place where people can gather, worship, learn, and experience community.
Our financial resources aren't simply numbers in a bank account. They're resources that make ministry possible. Our traditions aren't just things we preserve because we've always done them that way. They're practices that help us express our faith and pass it along to another generation. And the gifts and abilities of the people in this congregation aren't simply things we admire. They're things we can put to work.
Of course, we need to be responsible with all these things. But responsibility doesn't necessarily mean keeping everything exactly as it is. Sometimes responsibility means having the courage to use what we've been given, even when we can't guarantee how things will turn out. And I think that's where this strange and let's face it disturbing little parable begins to speak to us. Because the third slave was so afraid of losing what he'd been given that he never discovered what might have happened if he'd actually done something with it. He just buried it.
And I wonder how often we do the same thing.

So here's what I want you to take home today. Being faithful doesn't mean taking foolish risks, but neither does it mean playing it safe all the time. Sometimes faithfulness requires the courage to try something, even when we don't know how things will turn out. So ask yourself: "What have I buried because I was afraid of losing it? And what might happen if I found the courage to put it to good use?"