
Live like someone left the gate open
Martin Grove United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 and Matthew 25:14-30

I don't know about you - but I find our texts today just a little hard to take. We have two stories which - taken together - seem very challenging. In 1 Thessalonians we are told to be constantly awake, constantly ready for an event to happen. Something we can't see, or touch, or smell, or predict. And yet, somehow, we have to always be ready. Being a natural-born semi-procrastinator myself, I'm not sure I like where that text is going. Besides, this story is about 2,000 years old. How realistic is it to expect people to stay on "high alert" all this time when statistically it's very unlikely anything will happen in our own lifetimes. I mean, even just waiting for the Leafs to win the Stanley Cup again is already pushing my limits on waiting.

And it gets even more challenging when we couple it with the story from Matthew. A slave is criticized for making a poor investment decision. In my world, I've seen my own savings go up and down in the last decade unpredictably, and I would hate to be judged based on the value of my savings at one single point in time. Particularly a point in time that comes without warning. It really does not seem fair that the poor slave is criticized for not investing the money he was told to manage. And - although the idea of burying money in the ground sounds crazy to us - 2,000 years ago, it was quite common to bury valuable articles - particularly during times of war. People did not have bank accounts that were secured by the government back then. Burying money was often just the most reasonable plan there was.

Fortunately - I don't know if you realize this or not, but - I'm fully trained. I know exactly what I'm supposed to tell you about this story. It's very simple really. At least it's simple to say what the author originally intended. The "master" in the story is Jesus, who has left us - gone on a trip - but will return after some time. We are the slaves. And we get to decide - will we be like the first or second slave, you know, the "good" ones, or will we be like the third slave, the "bad" one who is cast into the fires of hell.

The story when written was all about waiting for Christ to return, at which time we would either go to a happy place or ... that other place. That's clearly what the story meant 2000 years ago. The problem of course is to bring it into the present. And that's difficult because of the simple fact that Jesus did not return in that way. And so I was trained to ignore the fact that the New Testament was written in Greek and use the idea that in English, the word "talents" can have a much broader than just "money", and I should now spin an inoffensive sermon about being good to each other or something like that. I should now preach a sermon that is predictable, boring, and mostly-harmless that makes you feel ok because you took care of your cat this morning, or something equally banal.

So - can we just go for coffee now? I don't think so!

But to go with tradition, we can talk about other assets and how we invest our time, our efforts, our energy, and our love. And in particular, how do we invest those limited resources in ways that God would appreciate? My Abingdon Commentary - from 1929 - puts it this way - forgive the exclusive language - "neglect and laziness result in loss and deterioration of our original endowments. Modern psychology has amply verified this teaching. The unused capacity, mental and moral as well as physical, becomes lost capacity. The sluggard loses even that which he hath. The parable seems also to lay emphasis on the truth that in the church it is the indifference of the moderately endowed men, who form the majority, that is to be deplored."

Now there's a great quote, "it is the indifference of the moderately endowed people, who form the majority, that is to be deplored." John Wesley had a similar reaction to this text, declaring that "mere harmlessness, on which many build their hope of salvation, was the cause of [the man's] damnation.". It is not enough to not harm other people. It appears that we have to be more constructive than that! Maybe "being nice" isn't good enough after all.

But what if I suggested to you that the meaning of the story - in the present - is far more interesting than that? What if I told you that the story is even more scary than that - more scary than a story about the possibility of going to hell. What if the story is in fact actually about ... well, we will get to that in a moment.

But let me step back a bit first. One fun activity is to hear what non-Christians

think about stories in the Bible. I didn't have time to survey people on the streets this week. I didn't even have time to read a book about someone who did that themselves. But I did have time to read a summary of a book called "upside-down Bible" written by Symon Hill who surveyed Christians and non-Christians about what various Bible stories mean. And - in his opinion - the story where Christians and non-Christians have the most wildly differing opinions is this story. Because Christians think the story is about our talents, but non-Christians think the story is about something we generally don't speak about in church ... money!

When non-Christians read this story, the "master" is never seen in a good light. The master is seen like the 1%, or perhaps even the 0.1%, the people on our planet who have most of the money and get to make all the big decisions. So if you want to hear this story differently, start by losing the idea that the master in the story is Jesus. If you do that, then who do you identify with in the story? If you identify with the master - if you are in fact one of the 1% yourself, please speak with me afterwards about helping me get a new car. But if you are like most people, you probably identify with the third servant.

I say that because the third servant is hard-working, but lives in fear of what their boss will decide about them. The third servant has responsibility without real authority. The third servant gets to carry 100% of the guilt and 0% of any profits to be made. In other words, the third servant is just a regular person. He lives in fear - as many of us do. He is poor, and he is punished for being poor.

Does that sound extreme? Consider our clothing industry. Clothes for us are made as cheaply as possible in places we ourselves could never even locate on a map. Working conditions in these factories - which are dictated by rich people - are worse than atrocious, and when worker's rights start to gain momentum, when the hoped for promise that the foreign factory would bring prosperity and better quality of life to the local workers, when the workers are just about through the first phase which was harsh and difficult and they see a sustainable potential for a still difficult but brighter future - the company simply moves the factory to a country with even lower labour standards and the workers are thrown onto the streets. Poor people are punished. The poor person in our story is punished, and the poor of our world are punished too.

If we read the story that way, we should emulate the third servant, speaking truth to power and speaking up against unjust money-making activities, instead of colluding with it like that first and second servants do. And feel free when you go home to rummage through your clothes closet and reflect again on who you identify with in our gospel story.

This sermon is going from bad to worse. You are probably starting to think you might have preferred a boring sermon, and are wondering what on earth this has to do with a dancing sheep. Can Rev. Paul pull this sermon out of this noise-dive? Where is the hope in all of this? I believe there is hope.

So let's return to "the sluggard is to be deplored". Perhaps the reason that sluggards are deplored has deeper meaning. Preacher and mathematician Brian Buydens has an interesting take on this. He points out that depending on which translation you use, the phrase, "You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow and gather where I did not scatter" is either a statement, or a question. If it's read as a statement, then the master is in fact a crook, and the slave should be congratulated for being discerning enough to realize it. But if it's read as a question, then it is simply the slave's assumption that the master is cruel. The master might actually be benevolent. If we read the story that way then the slave buries the money not because his master is cruel, but rather, in Buydens's words, "it is the servant's stunted view of the master that causes him to not excel." If we read it the way, the problem is the the slave doesn't really understand the master, and his actions are based on his misunderstanding of the master's character.

Which leads me to wonder - for us - what is our view of the master. Or, to speak more plainly, what is our view of Jesus or God? Do we - like the slave - have a stunted view of the master? How would we know? Well, I suppose there are lots of ways to look at that. But consider this. We proclaim - sometimes boldly - that the kingdom of God is within each of us. That each of us are one of God's children. That we are not alone. That we are loved.

Do we believe that? Do we act like we believe that? If we feel - really feel - like children of God, is it possible for us to be narrow-minded or bitter? Of course not.

Taking time to feel the peace of God in your life can only create in you a heart to be gracious and loving yourself. Not that your life will be perfect, because that's not the point anyway. But you will know that you are not alone. And you will know that you are loved.

[discussion - do we live as if the kingdom of God is within us?]

I can't put words to completely describe what it feels like to live as if the kingdom of God is within each of us. But I think I have a visual. *[Show the bulletin cover of the dancing sheep]* Because living as if the kingdom of God is within us would be energizing and liberating. It would be living our lives as if someone left the gate open. Unconstrained. Joy. Not worrying about the future. Living into the present moment to its fullest. Fully aware. Would we still have problems? Of course. But we would feel a deep sense of joy and love that would be tangible. Or perhaps - in the language of our gospel today - we would feel truly invited to "enter into the joy of our master".

As we approach Advent, I encourage each of us to live as if someone left the gate open. Be present. Be yourself. Feel joy. Feel free.

Amen.

