

Sermon – Matthew 25:31-46
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“Stewards of Abundance”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace this day in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. For it is as if a man, wanting a clean home, asked his three children to clean their rooms. And two children take up the task, going through drawers, cleaning off shelves, unearthing the no-longer-used, and imagining new homes for these things. Passing them down to a sibling or cousin; saving them for the Grace rummage sale or setting them aside for Goodwill; or just plain throwing some of it away. But a third child, who of course bears no resemblance to anyone living in my house, steadfastly refuses to get rid of anything. To this child, it is all buried treasure. To be specific, it is all treasure that gets buried under this particular child's bed. I appreciate to a degree their desire to hang onto things they may again prove useful. The problem is that, once buried under the bed, that's where these things remain. In holding onto these old toys and treasures, they become functionally useless and without value.
2. What is a matter of some amusement in my household takes on a much more serious tone in the second of the three parables of judgment in Matthew 25. Jesus tells of a man not with three children but three servants. The master is going on a journey and needs help managing his property while he's away. To one he gives five talents; to another, two; to the last, one. He apportions his wealth according to their ability. While the sums differ, all three servants are entrusted with the master's abundance. Estimates vary, but a talent was likely worth twenty years' wages. Even at a modest \$30,000 each year, this

means a talent would be worth \$600,000 today. The master's resources are abundant, and he shares abundantly.

3. The parable moves straightforwardly enough. The first two servants busy themselves, putting the money to work. Each doubles what was entrusted to them. But the third? Fearing that he might lose some of it, he takes a shovel and buries his talent in the ground. When after a long time the master returns, he sits down to settle accounts. The two are commended, entrusted with even more, and invited into the joy of their master – a promotion, it seems, from slave to member of the household. But as for the third servant? He comes cowering: “I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid.” The master, wrathful at this wasted opportunity, takes the talent from him and throws him into the outer darkness. The one thing this master won't abide is leaving the talent hidden. Abundance is meant to be used, and fear is no way to steward that abundance.
4. The parable makes clear the reality of judgment and the possibility of condemnation. God, as we hear through Zephaniah, is not unaware of our sin, our failure to steward the superabundance with which God has blessed us. Zephaniah's ministry followed the reign of King Manasseh of Judah, quite possibly the worst king in the history of God's people, which is really saying something. He set up idols for star worshippers, encouraged temple prostitution, and practiced child sacrifice. The people suffered under his rule for 55 years, the faithful among them no doubt wondering *why* God seemed so absent for so long, no doubt asking *when* God would return to make things right. There can be no questioning God's rightful wrath in the face of such sin. It burns hot. But it is not the last word. Zephaniah's writings conclude not with doom but with the promise that God will bring the faithful home and restore their fortunes.

5. Sin demands judgment, but with God the final word is promise. Not long after preaching this parable, Jesus takes our sins to the cross. “For God,” as Paul reminds us this morning, “has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us.” Christ, the treasure of heaven, is taken by us and buried in the ground. Upon him the judgment falls. But God will not let the treasure stay buried. In his resurrection, our sin is left behind and our fear is overwhelmed by hope. With faith in the Christ who would not stay buried, we can claim the abundance of God and live boldly and faithfully. The only thing to fear from the master is the fear we bring, the petty assumption that God will think and act like us. But God does not. God acts with abundance and invitation, creating a kingdom of grace. As for the third servant? The judgment is real, and he brings it upon himself. As the preacher Dirk Lange writes, “The third servant has not only hidden the talent, he has buried himself. The third servant is not so much condemned as he condemns himself to a place – a life – that knows not joy, that knows only darkness and wailing and grinding of teeth.”

6. For the sake of Christ, we have been saved from sin and wrath. We are invited into the abundance of the kingdom and the joy of the master. What will we do? We begin by *not* following in the footsteps of the third servant. Christ is alive, unearthed; let no one bury the gifts of God. Instead, let us be bold in sharing the abundance of the gospel and the goodness of creation. Boldness, of course, takes different forms. Sometimes it looks oddly like sitting still, as when we stay home during this pandemic so that others may be kept safe from contagion’s spread. Sometimes it is the quieting of voices that have spoken too loudly for too long so that the voices of our Black sisters and brothers can speak truth we need to hear. Sometimes it is joyfully participating in abundant giving. Those of us who attended last night’s virtual gala for Harmony Community Cares witnessed this firsthand as we blew past the goal of \$125,000, money that will help feed and teach God’s people in the North Lawndale community. This world’s inequalities would keep the talents

of North Lawndale and its people buried, but as Pastor Brooks reminded us, God is still up to something. These treasures are being unearthed and set free. This is how you invest in God's work in the world.

7. And sometimes living boldly requires a faith that would risk everything. After all, the servants with five and two talents could have lost it all. Pastor Casey Baggot tells the story of Magda Trocmé and her husband André, who served as pastor in the French town of Le Chambon during World War II. They and their fellow townspeople provided refuge for those fleeing the Nazis, even though they knew they were under constant surveillance. They saved the lives of more than 3,500 Jews, most of whom were children, as well as 1,500 others. After the war, Magda spoke to those who found her courage hard to fathom. She said, "Remember that in your life there will be lots of circumstances where you will need a kind of courage, a kind of decision on your own, not about other people but about yourself." Baggot writes, "Ultimately, their investment of personal risk and gospel love yielded an enormous reward." This, too, is how you invest in God's work in the world.
8. God is not the angry master the third servant imagines. While we deserve the wrath he anticipates, what we get is Jesus Christ. His gifts of faith, hope, and love far exceed any earthly treasure. In his death, we find life. In him, our once buried lives and talents have been unearthed, set free for God's purposes in the world. Be bold! What we must *not* do is nothing, for now there is nothing to fear. Christ has come out of his earthy grave; why would you choose to stay there? Get to work, investing your life – time, talent, and treasure – in acts of love and service. Yes, the master has gone on a journey. But before he left, he told us to go, to baptize people of every nation in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The treasure is to be shared and multiplied. And remember, even as we await his return in glory, we do so in his presence now, for Christ promises to be with us until the end of the age. Waiting for him, waiting with him, be about the work of the kingdom,

knowing that one day, for Jesus' sake, God will say unto you, "Well done, good and faithful servant; enter into the joy of your master." Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep you hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.