November 15, 2026 Pentecost 25
Matthew 25:14-30 Pastor Jeff Laustsen

"Unburied Treasure"

"For to all who have more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but for those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away."

"Will you please watch this for me?"

Being asked to take care of something that belongs to a friend, a neighbour, or a family member is both a tremendous honour and a serious responsibility. It means that someone trusts us enough to place something valuable in our care, and that means we have the obligation to be faithful in fulfilling the trust that has been placed in us. It may be something as simple as taking in a person's mail and newspapers while they are on vacation or watering their houseplants while they are away. It may mean visiting their home to make certain that all is well and no unforeseen disaster such as a flooded basement has taken place. It may extend beyond physical matters to look after important members of their household, from their beloved pets to taking care of their children for a few hours after school. The trust may extend to looking after elderly parents or moving into their home to take care of family members during the caregiver's absence. No matter the extent of the tasks that are entrusted to us, each means that the person holds us in high regard and leads them to believe we are trustworthy in caring for that which is placed in our hands. In turn, our task is to be faithful to this trust and care for whatever is placed in our care in the manner in which those who have entrusted us assume will happen.

Today's Gospel lesson presents us with a scenario in which persons are entrusted with caring for treasures that belong to another person, placed under their care in the belief that they will be faithful caregivers of that which they are given. This parable is a continuation of Jesus' teaching that begins with his statement that *"the kingdom of heaven will be like this"* (Matthew 25:1). Coming toward the end of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is teaching his followers what it means when they pray the words he taught them in the Sermon on the Mount: *"Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."* (6:10). It is Jesus' teaching that he will announce to Pontius Pilate in the hours before his death, that *"my kingdom is not from this world"* (John 18:36). As he taught in his Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids, a distinction will be made between those who are faithful and those who are unfaithful in response to Jesus' call to live and serve in the kingdom that he has come to inaugurate, a kingdom

where they will be called to follow his example as one who came *"not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."* (Mark 10:45).

Today's parable focuses on a man who entrusts those under his charge with caring for that which belongs to him as he sets out on a journey. Jesus introduces three servants who are each entrusted with differing amounts of "talents," a large sum of money that was equal to the wages of a day labourer for fifteen years. As a result of the wide circulation of this story, "talent" came into the English language in the Middle Ages as a term for God-given abilities, "gifts and graces." The "talents" in this story refer to the money entrusted to each servant *"according to his ability"* (25:15). Three servants are each given various amounts of money that are being placed in their trust: to the first is given five talents, to the second two talents, and to the third one talent. We are not told why more is entrusted to the first servant than the second or third, but even one talent was a significant amount of money. While there are no explicit directions given to the servants about how they are to care for what is entrusted to them, the first two servants take the initiative of trading with the money and earning a large return on their investment: *"The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had two talents made two more talents."* (25:16-17). While there are no details as to how they achieved such success, any investment that yields a 100% return would be welcome by any investor!

In contrast, the third servant does not go into the marketplace to trade or invest the one talent entrusted to him. Instead, he *"went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money"* (25:18). This is the equivalent of those who do not trust banks or other investment firms but hide their money in the proverbial mattress or in coffee cans buried in the backyard. While he will soon be seen as the foolish one in this parable, in reality he does not do anything wrong *per se:*

- "He doesn't squander anything; he doesn't mistreat or steal from anyone. Entrusted with one talent of his master's money, he does what he thinks is best: avoids risk, buries the money for safekeeping, and waits for this master's return." – Leigh Benish.

Anyone who has worked in a place where money is entrusted to you can relate to the reaction of this servant. In our church office, moneys that have been given for the sake of the church's ministry are usually placed in the office safe so that they are preserved for their intended use. When I have been placed in a position of responsibility, such as the summer when I housesat for a family in Massachusetts, I

did my best to preserve their home and not change anything so that when they returned it was exactly as they left it.

As often happens in Jesus' parables, there is an unexpected twist when the master returns: *"After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them"* (25:19). When the first two servants report that they have doubled his money, the master is understandably overjoyed and offers them praise and the equivalent of a promotion: *"Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master."* (25:21, 23). No mention is made of how he would have responded if they had invested poorly and lost all the master's money; all we know is that their efforts were successful and are rewarded. *"Having been trustworthy in small matters, they are promised greater responsibilities."* (Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri).

When the third servant approached the master to settle accounts, there is an expectation that this pattern of a doubled investment will continue; but instead, the third servant makes a very different report that speaks of the different path he chose: *"Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping what you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours"* (25:24-25). Because he knew that his master was a demanding person, he is paralyzed with fear at the thought of losing his master's money and chooses what he determines to be the safest option. When his turn comes to report to the master, *"the third slave is honest, both in admitting his fear and in saying that he has preserved the gift so that nothing would be lost"* (Benish). While it is usually true that "honesty is the best policy," this is not what happens when the master responds to this servant's honest answer:

- "You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own, with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents." – 25:26-28.

Having failed to make even a minimal effort, he is branded a wicked and lazy servant. This harsh rebuke is compounded when the master issues a proclamation that sentence the third servant to the "outer darkness" because of his decisions: *"For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."* (25:29-30). On the surface, this appears to be a vastly

inappropriate response to the caution of the third servant; after all, he returned exactly what had been entrusted to him, as does anyone in whom trust has been placed. Why is this servant singled out for such condemnation when he has done what has been asked of him, banished to the realm of the damned along with *"all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth"* (13:42)? Whatever he may have done wrong, why is he being so severely singled out and punished?

There are many disturbing details in this parable which seems to support a so-called "prosperity gospel" that sees the rich as being rewarded for their righteousness and the poor as being punished for their faithlessness. The statement that *"to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away"* seems to reinforce the modern drive in some political circles to give more to the wealthy and take away what little the poor may have, a sort of "reverse Robin Hood" syndrome. But such an interpretation flies in the face of the teachings of Scripture in which God's people are called to care for the poor among them and look to whatever riches they may have not as a reward for their faithfulness but as a trust that is to be used for the purposes God intends. Rather than interpreting Jesus' words as a justification for practices and legislation that results in the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer, we must also heed God's Word spoken through the prophets on what it means to *"do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with your God"* (Micah 6:8):

- "Is not this the fast I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, and the glory of the LORD shall be your rearguard." – Isaiah 58:6-8.

We must return to the context in which Jesus sets this parable if we are to truly understand his teaching to all who would be his followers. It is a parable that does not speak of how we are to live in a human economy but in the economy of the Kingdom of Heaven. Seen through this lens, the parable functions as an allegory of the *Parousia,* in which the meaning of "good and faithful" is not mere theological correctness, passive waiting, or strict obedience to clear instructions, but active responsibility that takes both initiative and risk. Faithfulness is not merely obedience to directions; *"each servant must decide how to use his time during his master's absence. Matthew points to the necessity for decision and responsible*

action." (M. Eugene Boring). Seen through this lens, we might better understand the reason behind the master's harsh rebuke of the servant who chose to bury what had been entrusted to him rather than take the risk that resulted in a great reward for the others:

- "The master's issue is not that this one failed to double the amount but that he chose to do nothing with what he had been given. He was so afraid of losing what had been placed under his care that he never gave himself the opportunity to do anything with it. In his effort to avoid failure, he guaranteed that he would never truly succeed." – Benish.

Seen through the lens of Jesus' teaching on the kingdom of heaven, we can read the parable as a scenario in which the master (Jesus) entrusts his wealth to servants (disciples) while he goes on a journey (his death, resurrection, and ascension). While the "talents" in the story are monetary, they may also be seen as the abilities and aptitudes entrusted to God's people that are to be used for the edification of the church in its mission to proclaim the gospel to all nations:

- "The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ." – Ephesians 4:11-13.

Such talents may also symbolize the "mysteries of the kingdom of heaven" (13:11), the interpretation of the parables that the disciples received from Jesus in private (*"But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it."* – 13:16-17). The disciples of Jesus have been entrusted with the precious treasure of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and it is not a treasure that is to be buried or hidden but shared with others so that they might fulfill Jesus' commission to *"go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching they to obey everything that I have commanded you."* (28:19-20).

- "Being entrusted with the message of salvation entails great responsibility. To sit on that message or to bury it for ourselves is a serious breach of responsibility to the Lord, who calls us to share the good news with the world.

He does not want us to give it back to him unshared and unfruitful." – Mitch and Sri.

Jesus' parable is a call for us to recognize that we have been entrusted with the greatest treasure of all: the Word of God that proclaims to all the world that Jesus Christ is Lord, and that in him there is the hope of *"strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow."* The Church of Jesus Christ in every generation are the servants who have been entrusted by our Master to be faithful stewards of this liberating Word, to never hide it or keep it to ourselves but to use it for the purpose for which it is intended, to be shared with all in the assurance that God's Word *"shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it."* (Isaiah 55:11). The Church of Christ in every age recognizes that as stewards of this previous treasure *"we have no mission but to serve in full obedience to our Lord; to call for all, without reserve, and spread his liberating word."* (ELW Hymn 729).

- "My favourite definition of the church comes from Karl Barth, who said, '[The Church] exists … to set up for the world a new sign which is radically dissimilar to [the world's] own manner and which contradicts it in a way which is full of promise … Having experienced the grace of God for ourselves, we wanted to dispense it to others, free of charge, no strings attached, as grace always comes. The church, I have learned, can indeed be a new sign radically dissimilar to the world's own manner, and to contradict it in a way which is full of promise. For this reason, church is worth the bother." – Philip Yancey.
- "Action is a grateful response that flows from our awareness of God's presence in the world. Jesus' entire ministry was one great act of thanksgiving to his Father. It is to participation in this ministry that we are called … those acting within the house of God point through their action to the healing, restoring, redeeming, and re-creating presence of God." – Henri Nouwen.

"Will you please watch this for me?"

As being entrusted with caring for what belongs to another person brings with it both honour and responsibility, the trust our Lord places in us to care for the treasures of the Kingdom of Heaven and use the precious Word placed in our care is both a tremendous honour and a serious responsibility. We are to faithful preserve this Holy Word so that we might pass it on to future generations, but that does not mean that we bury it in the ground or lock it in a safe. Instead, the liberating Word that is in our care is to be "unburied treasure" that is freely shared as we are called to never

hide the light of Christ but to *"let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."* (5:16). As the people of God who recognize that *"all that we have is thine alone, a trust, or Lord, from thee"* (ELW Hymn 686), may we never bury these treasures or hide the light of Christ from others; as good and faithful servants, may we always endeavor to share this Word of light and life so that all may know that they are beloved children of God and that the blessing we received might be shared with others: that *"the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you* ***all."***

Amen.