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Life of freedom  
Sydenham-Heritage United Church  
November 1, 2020  
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.

[image: stay awake]

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. Statistically it's very unlikely this event will happen in our own lifetimes. I mean, even waiting for the Leafs to win the Stanley Cup again pushes 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 unpredictably.

[image: investments]

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. The idea of burying money in the ground may sound crazy to us. But 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 valuables was often the most reasonable plan there was. And yet the slave was criticized for doing just that.

[image: emmanuel]

Fortunately - I don't know if you realize this or not, but - I'm fully trained as a minister. I know exactly what I'm *supposed* to tell you about this story in Matthew. It's

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very simple really. 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 which slave in the story we want to emulate. 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 people 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 the story into the present. And that’s difficult because Jesus did not return in that way that the New Testament anticipated. The author of Matthew was waiting for Jesus to return quite soon. We know that it didn't happen that way. So what do we do with this story?

I was trained at seminary - with stories like this - to ignore the fact that the New Testament was written in Greek. And to 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, and mostly-harmless. A sermon that makes you feel ok because you fed your cat this morning or something like that.

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.”

[slide: it is the indifference ...]

Now there’s a quote that is *not* going to fill the pews. “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

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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 people" isn't good enough after all.

But I'm going to suggest that the meaning of the story - in the present - is far more interesting than that. What if I told you that the story is 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's step back a bit first. Since this story seems to be confusing to Christians, perhaps we should ask non-Christians what the story is about. Perhaps a non-Christian perspective can help us open our eyes a bit. 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.

[image: upside-down bible]

Hill 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 in Matthew. 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!

But more to the point, 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 through a different lens, start by discarding 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 0.1% yourself, please speak with me after service about helping me get a better car. But I suspect that most of us 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 100% of the blame and 0% of any profits to be made. In other

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words, the third servant is just a regular person. They live in fear - as many of us do. The servant is poor, and is punished for being poor.

Does that sound realistic? Do you think that in today's world poor people are punished for being poor? Consider our clothing industry.

[image: fast fashion worker]

Particularly the part of the clothing industry we call, "fast fashion". Clothes for us are made as cheaply as possible in places we ourselves cannot even locate on a map.

Working conditions in these factories - conditions that are dictated by wealthy 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 starts to materialize. At that point 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. Only the third servant speaks truth to power. Only the third servant speaks against unjust money-making activities. The first and second servants collude with the unjust practices. The third servant tries to take a stand even at significant personal cost.

[image: closet]

Perhaps the best way to read this story is to stand inside our clothes closets and read the story out loud as if we've never heard it before. Then decide which character in the story we related best with.

I get the feeling this sermon is going from bad to worse. You are probably starting to think you might have preferred that mostly-harmless sermon, and are wondering what on earth this has to do with the title, which was about living a life of freedom. Perhaps the only reason you are still listening is to see if Rev. Paul can pull this sermon out of the noise-dive it is in? Where is the hope in all of this? The hope is coming.

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. There is a key sentence in our text that can be heard as either a

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question or a statement.

[text: you knew, did you ...]

The master says to the servant, “You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow and gather where I did not scatter”. Is that a statement, or a question? The biblical greek is not clear so we need to decide for ourselves. 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 that the slave doesn’t really understand the master. The slave’s actions are based on a misunderstanding of the master’s character.

[image: wordle]

Which leads me to wonder - for us - what is our view of the master. And use whatever language you prefer here if you don’t like the word, “master”. I could say, what is our view of Jesus or God, or Spirit? Or perhaps you have other words. The question is, do we - like the slave - have a stunted view of the master? Perhaps more importantly, how would we even know?

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. That we are connected to each other. That - as we said earlier this morning - “the breath of God within me recognizes the breath of God within you.”

Is all of that just a bunch of words? Or do we believe them? And now the big question - do we act like we believe them? Is all of this flowery language just poetry, or do we let the truth of these words impact how we choose to live our lives.

For example - If we feel - really feel - that we are connected to each other, is it possible for us to be narrow-minded or bitter towards each other? Really? How exactly does that work? That would be like singing “praise to God” while looking sad and dejected.

We have every right to feel blessed. We have the love of God. We have each other.

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What else do we need? But do we act as if we feel blessed? Would strangers on the street know that we carry deep peace in our hearts? Or would strangers on the street think we are just as freaked out as they are?

I think we feel some dissonance about this ourselves. Our lives are not perfect. We have lots of problems, some of which we have no idea how to deal with. Problems like COVID-19 come along, and can't just be blown away you know. [blow] Hey - that was not supposed to work! Do NOT believe everything you see on the Internet!

You know me well enough to know that I'm not preaching a polly-anna approach to life here. Life is not perfect. Life is not supposed to be perfect. But we can still create space in our own hearts to remember that we are blessed. We can still live like we know that we are loved. That we are not alone. That we are all connected.

My words here are sounding a bit weak, so here's a visual.  
[image: dancing sheep]

Here's a sheep who is living life as if someone left the gate open. Unconstrained. Joy. Living into the present moment to its fullest. Fully aware.

What does it mean to you to be a child of God? Does it include feeling a deep sense of joy and love that is tangible. A sense of connection and love? Or perhaps - in the language of our gospel today - a feeling of being invited to "enter into the joy of our master".

I encourage each of us to live as if someone left the gate open. Be present. Be yourself. Feel joy. Feel freedom. Live that freedom.

*Amen.*