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Live as if someone left the gate open  
Chapel in the Park United Church  
November 2, 2025  
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 readings today just a little hard to take. We have two stories. Either of which is tough enough on their own. But when taken together, the overall picture is not very encouraging.

[image: stay awake]

In 1 Thessalonians we are told to be constantly awake, constantly ready for something to happen. Something we cannot 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 long are we supposed to just wait? Even waiting for the Leafs to win the Stanley Cup again pushes my limits on waiting.

And the story in Matthew is not any easier to hear.

[image: investments]

A slave is criticized for making a poor investment decision. In my world, I've seen my own savings go up and down unpredictably. I would hate to be judged based on the value of my savings at any one 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 they were told to manage. And I realize that the idea of burying money in the ground sounds crazy to us. But 2,000 years ago, it was actually quite common to bury valuable articles. Particularly during times of war or uncertainty. People did not have bank accounts that were secured by their government back then. Burying valuables was often the most reasonable plan there was. And yet the slave was criticized for doing just that.

[image: light in the clouds]

Fortunately, I'm a fully trained minister. I know exactly what I'm supposed to tell you about these stories. It's very simple really.

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The community in Thessalonica was waiting for Christ to return - and they were actually puzzled that it had not happened yet.

The story Matthew is written as an allegory. The characters in the story represent other people. For example, the “master” in the story is Jesus. Why? Well, in the story, the master is going on a trip but will return at some point. And at this point in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus has been crucified and has gone away, but the community was expecting Christ to return soon.

The slaves in the story are ... us. And we have the choice of being like one of the good slaves (who go to heaven) or the bad slave (who goes to hell). If you think I’m overstating things referring to heaven and hell, I quote from the story. To the good slaves the master says, “enter into the joy of your master”. And to the bad slave, the master throws them “into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth”. Trust me - the story is about heaven and hell. And what makes a slave a good slave or a bad slave is how well we have invested the talents that the master had given them to manage.

The author of 1 Thessalonians and the author of Matthew expected Jesus to return soon. Soon - as in I don’t need to buy more cat food - soon. But we know that Jesus did not return in that way. So what do we do with these stories today?

One traditional way to preach these texts - that I’m sure you’ve all heard before - is to pretend that the New Testament was written in English. And to take the word “talents” - which obviously referred to money - and talk about talents in terms of the gifts that you and I all have. Like our talent to crochet, or sing, or whatever. And I should now preach a sermon that is predictable, and mostly-harmless. Traditionally, we’ve been told this story is about investing our gifts and other talents while we wait for Christ to return. That’s a nice tidy moral message, right?

But after 2,000 years of waiting, maybe it’s time to consider other interpretations. What if the lesson for us is not about waiting at all? What if the message is about how we live today? What if the whole point is not about waiting for Jesus to return by popping out of the clouds. But instead asking whether or not you and I are awake enough - right now - to notice that Christ is already present in our midst?

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Because something else is going on in both these stories. And what was going on in those stories is still happening today. We just need to lean into human nature a bit.

Consider the story in Matthew. 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 did not have time to survey people on the streets this week. But I was intrigued by something in a book called “The 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!

When non-Christians read this story, the “master” is not Jesus. In fact, the master is not seen in a good light at all. The master is seen like one of 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 we do that, then who do you identify with in the story? I suspect that most of us would identify with the third slave.

I say that because the third slave is hard-working, but lives in fear of what their boss will decide about them. The third slave has responsibility without real authority. The third slave gets 100% of the blame and 0% of any profits to be made. In other words, the third slave is just a regular person. They live in fear - as many of us do. The slave 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? Absolutely! Consider our clothing industry.

[image: fast fashion worker]

Consider the part of the clothing industry we call, “fast fashion”. Our clothes 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 -

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are worse than atrocious. But sometimes, worker's rights do start to gain momentum. The people were of course promised that the foreign-owned factory would bring prosperity and better quality of life to the locals. But when the workers start to gain some ground, at that point the company simply moves the factory to a place 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.

[image: closet]

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

And again, I suspect we probably relate best to the third slave. Only the third slave speaks truth to power. Only the third slave speaks against unjust money-making activities. The first and second slaves collude with the unjust practices of the master. The third slave tries to take a stand even at significant personal cost.

[image: stuck in mud]

I get the feeling this sermon is going from bad to worse. We seem to be bogged down. You are probably starting to think you might have preferred that mostly-harmless sermon. Perhaps you are wondering what on earth this has to do with the title,

[image: image with new title]

which is about living a life of freedom - living like someone left the gate open. Perhaps the only reason you are still listening is to see if Rev. Paul can pull this sermon out of the mud hole he has driven us into? Where is the hope in all of this? The hope is coming. I hope.

The hope comes from a place that might be surprising. The hope, oddly enough, comes from the same place the anxiety does - from fear itself.

Both texts have fear as a primary ingredient. In 1 Thessalonians, the people live in FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out). So they have to stay hyper-vigilant.

And fear is driving the entire story in Matthew. The slave lives in fear. Fear of making a mistake. Fear of their harsh master. Fear of making a poor investment. The slave's fear is so strong that the slave does not actually decide what to do with the money

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- so they simply bury it. Out of sight. Out of mind.

Fear prevented the slave from acting. And today, fear can keep us from acting. Even when we want to act in our own best interests. Fear can keep us from living freely today. Fear can be a barrier between where we are, and living a life of freedom. Fear can keep us from being our true selves.

[image: you are loved]

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. That we are connected to each other. That - as we sometimes say in our worship greeting - "the breath of God within me recognizes the breath of God within you."

Is all of that just a bunch of nice-sounding words? Or do we believe the things that we say? And now the big question - do we act like we believe those words? Is all of this flowery language just poetry, or do we let the truth of these words sink into our minds and hearts and impact how we choose to live our lives.

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

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 going to be perfect. We all have struggles to deal with. And I hope that we all reach out to people we trust when we need some help. And you can always reach out to me.

But even when life is difficult 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.

[image: dancing sheep]

I don't feel that I have adequate words to express that today. So I want to share a visual. Here is a dancing sheep on a road. This sheep is acting with joy. With enthusiasm. With life. Fully present in the moment. Why is the sheep on the road? Because someone

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left the gate open. And the sheep took advantage of the opportunity to live into that freedom.

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. Even when - or perhaps particularly when - we have struggles in life.

The gospel invitation is NOT “stand around staring at your feet feeling fearful and anxious until Christ returns”. The invitation is to “enter into the joy of your master”.

Instead of waiting for Christ to return, what if we look around for Christ to emerge - today - in love, justice, courage, and hope?

Our job is to “stay awake” in the sense that we should be present enough to notice those times when Christ appears amongst us. The point is not waiting for Christ to return. The point is to be awake enough to notice that Christ is already here.

This message is not a new message. In fact, we share this message every single week. At least since I’ve been here. Because every week we light the Christ candle to remind ourselves that Christ is with us. But at the end of the service, when we extinguish the candle, we don’t send Christ away. We do not put Christ back into a box to keep Christ all safely stored away for the next Sunday service.

No - we declare that the candle never mattered. And that after the candle is extinguished, that Christ is still present in us, with us, and through us. Each of us carries the light of Christ with us out into the world. And I hope that gives us a certain sense of joy, of belonging, of family.

[image: godspell]

Who here remembers the musical, Godspell? It was a fun, musical, and colourful walk through the gospel of Matthew. Great tunes. The movie version from 1973 was filmed in New York. But after a brief opening, the only people we see in the movie are Jesus and his friends. There are no bystanders. We do not see the general public at all during the movie after the initial opening. To me, one of the most dramatic pieces in the entire movie was right at the very end.

[image: almost the end scene]

At the very end, Jesus has been crucified, and his friends are carrying his dead

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body. They are carrying his body through the streets of the city while they sing songs of joy. And as I said, the streets are completely abandoned except for the cast. And at the very end, the camera stays in place, and the disciples carry Jesus to the left around the corner of this building.

And after we lose sight of the friends, the camera then moves to the right, which allows us to see down the street that Jesus's friends are on.

[image: end scene]

But instead of seeing Jesus's friends, we see the crowd of normal humanity. Jesus is present in the general public. Jesus is present in our midst.

[image: dancing sheep]

Perhaps someday we will all dance right out of this sanctuary, like this sheep. At least in our minds and hearts. But feel free to do it with your body too.

Live as if someone left the gate open. Allow yourself to enter open space. Live fully present in the moment. Live a life of freedom. Live a life of joy. Be yourself. And let our lives be a sign that Christ is already here.

The gate is open. And we are free to dance.

*Amen.*