Embrace your freedom
Chapel in the Park United Church
November 15, 2026
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Based on 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 and Matthew 25:14-30

It's that time of year again. We know that Christmas - or at least, Advent - is coming up fast. Soon we will get to fixate on egg nog and candy canes. But before we get there the authors of the lectionary have given us those biblical texts. Those texts point us towards Advent. But the texts seem designed to test our patience before we get there.
[image: stay awake]

In 1 Thessalonians we are told to be always awake, constantly ready for an event that is allegedly coming at any moment. And people have been waiting for over 2,000 years already. It's worse than waiting for the Leafs to win the Stanley Cup again, right? And yet, we are told to remain alert. At all times.
[image: investments]

And our reading from Matthew is no more comforting. A slave makes a poor investment decision. And for that, they are stripped of all value and "thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Which I think we all know is code for being thrown into hell. I would hate to be judged on the value of my own investments. Particularly when the day of reckoning comes after a very long time, and without any warning.

And the slave who simply buried the money was not really crazy. The idea sounds strange to our modern ears. 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.

So why does the lectionary give us those readings to help us prepare for Advent? Is there any connection? Well, I think there is actually. And I might have missed this connection myself except for the fact that last Sunday was my birthday. Which I should probably explain. Later.

But first, just to be clear. There is no real mystery as to what these stories meant when they were originally written. Consider the story from Matthew. The “master” in the story is Jesus, who has left us - gone on a trip - but will return at 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. On the surface, the answer is obvious.

These stories are difficult to understand today because Jesus has not yet returned in the way that the early Christian community expected. So these messages - like “stay awake at all times” simply do not make sense in a literal way. So what do we do with these stories?

[image: emmanuel]

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 meaning than just “money”. The word talents includes our abilities, our dedication, our commitment. I was taught that 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. And those messages are ok. They have value. But I think something more important is lurking in the gospel story.

Now - I know the rules. When in doubt, bring out a Bible commentary or some other scholarly source. My Abingdon Commentary - from 1929 - has this to say about our gospel story. 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: in the church it is the indifference …]

Now there is a quote that is not going to fill the pews. “In the church 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 [humanity's] damnation". In other words, it is not enough to not harm other people. It appears that we have to be more constructive than that! Maybe "being nice to others" is not good enough after all.

[image: stuck in the mud]

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 is "Embrace your freedom". Perhaps the only reason you are still listening is to see if Rev. Paul can pull this sermon out of mud hole he seems to have intentionally driven it into? Where is the hope in all of this? Where is the freedom?

And to answer that question, I have to tell you about my birthday celebration last week.

[image: cake pictures]

Part of my celebration you already know. I thank you all for singing to me and sharing your gifts of cards, cakes, and well-wishes. And I deeply appreciated all that. Thank you to everyone who was part of that celebration last Sunday morning. And my thanks to everyone who helped make that happen.

[image: escape room]

But later in the day, some of my family went together to an "escape room". How many of us have been to an "escape room". Escape rooms are games. Teams of people start in a room that has been designed for the purpose. The team is given a story-line. And they are given objectives, like learning certain facts and usually - unlocking a door that allows the team to escape from the room. Hence the term, "escape room".

In order to achieve an objective, you have to work together as a team to solve puzzles, or riddles, or other types of pattern-matching exercises.

[image station m]

In our case, we went to Casa Loma and did an escape room called "Station M". Our objectives were to identify the name of a spy, and a mole in our own organization, and to deactivate a self-destruct bomb that we inadvertently activated. This all had to be

done in less than a certain amount of time.

[image: vault door]

The game consisted of multiple rooms we had to work through. And one room included a door that looked a bit like a bank vault. I remember watching a team member fiddle with the lock mechanism on the door. They tried a bunch of different ways that might have unlocked the door. Then, they gave up. And I asked, “Is the door even locked?” In response, the person pulled on the door, and it opened. It was not locked. Because it looked like a lock, we all assumed the door was locked. But it was not locked. And when we went through that door, we found the final clues that we needed and we ended up winning the game.

I confess that in the heat of moment, I was only focused on working through the puzzle. But last Monday morning, when I read through our scripture readings for today, I realized that my words had also solved a different problem.

That problem - which appears in an escape room, and in our reading from Matthew, and in our approach to Advent - is this.

We often make assumptions that limit our own actions. And our assumptions are not always right. We often make assumptions that limit our own sense of what is possible. And we live smaller lives - not because of life, but because of assumptions that we believe about life.

In the escape room. A door that looks like a lock - we assume is locked. Particularly in a game where the whole objective of the game is to unlock things. And yet, we were free to simply open that door. And walk through.

For our third slave in our gospel story. Speaking to the master he says, “Master, I knew that you were a harsh person, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.” The slave’s fear caused him to not even make an attempt to use the gift he had been given. But that fear was based on an assumption. And that assumption was wrong. The slave is ultimately punished for doing nothing, not for doing something badly. The master says, “you wicked and lazy slave”. Doing nothing was the problem, not failing.

And for Advent, we know that we are supposed to be looking for Christ in our midst … and yet we often end up looking for a baby and do not see other possibilities. Because - spoiler alert - Christ is in our midst. Now. Our assumptions limit our ability to see Christ in our midst.

So - what about our slave? The slave's fear caused him to not even make an effort to improve his own life.

Earlier we said that John Wesley and others declared that being nice to others is not actually enough. The third slave demonstrates this perfectly. Because being nice to others is not enough. We also have to be nice to ourselves. The slave did not trust his own self-worth. And that is an assumption that many people carry.

We all carry assumptions about life. And while it is good to be sensible and understand our limitations, I think that most people - including me - carry other assumed limitations that are not based on reality. We all carry assumptions that cause us to pull back. To not engage. To limit our own sense of reality. To not know that - as children of God - that we are worth it. And even, to limit our own freedom to feel the grace of God in our own lives.

Those assumptions are like assuming that a door is locked. When in fact, it is not locked.

Think of a limitation you assume exists for you. Some form of a locked door. Because I want to simply ask you, "Is that door even locked?"

Some doors are of course actually locked. I am not claiming that anything is possible. We do live with real limitations. For example, I always wanted to be an air traffic controller. But in Canada air traffic controllers are forced to retire at age 60. So that is not going to happen. For many reasons actually. Some doors are locked to us. I'm not saying that anything is possible.

But we have more freedom than we usually see. We have more freedom than we usually live into. What doors do we have in our own lives that we assume are locked - and yet would open if we simply tried to open those door.

There are enough things in life that legitimately hold us back. We should be careful before we limit ourselves even further because of assumptions we make.

[image: we are freer than we think]

There is a bank that proclaims, “you are richer than you think”. Today, I proclaim that “we are freer than we think”. We all have more freedom that we know. We all have more freedom than we truly live into.

The hope - the call - in this message is that we will all embrace the freedom that we have. And not be limited by assumptions that we have made that are not based on reality.

Actually, there are many reasons we might not embrace our own freedom. False assumptions is one reason. Another common reason is fear. The slave was afraid of the master, but for reasons that were not true. The slave’s view of the master was wrong.

So I suppose we should also discuss - what is our view of the master? Meaning, what is the image of God that we carry with us? I know how we describe God here during worship. But what images of God do each of us carry with us through the week?

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.”

Those words speak to our freedom.

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. Do we live into the freedom that we have?

We have every right to live into our freedom. We have the love of God. We have each other. What else do we need? But do we act as if we feel that freedom? 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?

You know me well enough to know that I’m not preaching a Pollyanna approach to life here. Life is not perfect. Life is not going to become 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. We have the freedom

to live into that life.

Embrace your freedom. Because you are worth it.

[image: freedom - breaking chains]

And I want to close with this image. Because creating our own freedom means different things to different people. Embracing freedom usually involves breaking chains - chains that were holding us back.

But this image suggests something else too. Not only that we need to break our chains. But also that links in those chains can be transformed into our liberty. Think of parts of your life like links in a chain. Those parts of your life may include challenges and struggles. Those parts of your life in part define where you have come from. But those links can also lead to our liberation. If we had never been captive, would we even understand our freedom? We have to make peace with our misfortunes. Or else we will always be angry. We need to be liberated.

Embrace your freedom. And get ready for Advent.

Amen.