

The Rev. Seth Dietrich
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Unburied Treasure

In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the One Lord and Mother of us all. Amen.

We are nearing the end of the church year and the end of the story of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus is preparing his disciples for his absence and for their mission to carry on his work and to build the kingdom of God. The work will be hard, treacherous, but incredibly important to God and to the world. They have been entrusted with the most valuable treasure, the gospel. It is critical that they keep investing what has been entrusted to them, keep taking risks to spread this healing, renewing, light-bearing message that can literally save the world.

In front of us today is what's often called the parable of the talents. A talent is actually a Roman unit of money, a huge sum of money, let's call it a half million dollars. Jesus uses this extended metaphor of a rich landowner who entrusts his slaves with different sums of money, different amounts of talents, and he asks them to invest this money and then he goes away. A 1st century audience hearing this would have understood that this sum of money would have been turned into different assets: you might take the money, buy inventory of some kind of product to sell to make more money. Or you might take that money to buy land to buy and farm, to make more money. When the landowner comes back, he demands to see what kind of returns they have received on this large fortune entrusted to them.

Like so many of these deadly serious parables from Matthew, it's the ending that sticks in our throat. It seems so unnecessarily harsh. C'mon Jesus, the third guy did not invest because he was afraid. Does yelling at someone whose afraid ever really work? Personally, I think Matthew and his Jewish community have likely been traumatized by the destruction of the Temple and the killing of thousands and thousands of men, women and children. I wonder if this trauma comes out sideways sometimes. But even with this ending, notice that we are not told that the last slave is forever out in the cold. If the gospel is anything it is second chances and third chances and 143rd chances. And the distance from the outer darkness back into the warmth might be only a few feet, it might be just on the other side of the door.

Whatever we think about how the third slave is treated, the parable is a cautionary tale, a strong rebuke about burying one's treasure. Thousands of years later, we know that it's never the good guys who bury the treasure. It's the thieving pirates; the train robbers. Sometimes lauded as the best television shows ever made, *Breaking Bad*, is about a high school chemistry teacher, Walter White who decides to dabble in making and selling crystal meth, and throughout the show we see him fall deeper and deeper into darkness, one small bad choice leads him to another slightly

worse bad choice. It's a fascinating exploration of how human sin works. In a climactic scene he buries his treasure in the Arizona desert. It does not end well.

The human instinct to hoard and bury runs deep. Perhaps some of this is greed and pride, but I think often it's fear and shame. The larger arc of Jesus' gospel is not an angry God demanding more. The larger arc of the gospel is not a God who throws people out, especially people who are already fearful. The heart of the gospel is the whisper of the Spirit: "Do not be afraid." For this is why we so often bury our treasure. We are ashamed and afraid: afraid of being hurt, afraid of not doing it "right," afraid our offering is not good enough, afraid that we will be rejected, afraid we are not sharing with the right people, afraid if we share time, talent, energy, money, love, afraid we will run out. Meanwhile, we hear this other voice, "Do not be afraid." This other voice that says, "Do not worry. I can take your imperfect little piece and weave into something much larger than you can imagine."

Jesus is preparing his disciples for his absence and for their mission to carry on his work and to build the kingdom of God. Here is another way we might tell the story. A man—let's call him Jesus—was going on a journey. He called his slaves—let's call them disciples—to him and entrusted the treasure of the gospel to them. Now the gospel has these different dimensions, these different asset classes. So that we might say, to one disciple, he gave sacred stories; to another disciple, he gave compassion for the most vulnerable; to a third, he gave the elements of worship. Jesus asked them to share, to invest, to build the kingdom of Love. And then he went away.

The disciple who got the sacred stories joined some kind of discussion group in her local spiritual community. And in the group they often circled back the story of God's enduring and eternal love. And she also told her own sacred story, the joys and struggles of her own life because this was a part of God's story, too. And this was very attractive and also healing. Those in the group said to one another, "Wow, we are not alone in all this pain and grief and confusion." And more and more people saw that they could be themselves in all their flaws and they could be in the warmth of a human community and the community grew. And the Kingdom of Love grew. And Jesus said, "Well done, good and faithful servant!"

The disciple who received compassion for the vulnerable went out and put her heart and energy into offering that compassion to others. She fed the hungry and offered clothes to the shivering and she went to the Gifts of Hope Fair at her local parish where people could buy Christmas gifts and at the same time invest in making other people's lives better. And there were so many people like her. People who were incredibly privileged not to be hungry for *food*, but who were starving for meaning, starving to become part of this larger project of healing and renewal, starving to learn how to take some of what they had accumulated and to use it for beauty and goodness and truth in a dark and angry world. This kind of sharing was highly attractive to

others. The sharing made others share, and the community grew. And the Kingdom of Love grew. And Jesus said, “Well done, good and faithful servant!”

And then there was the third disciple who had been given all the elements of worship: the beauty of the old traditions, sacred music, the flowers, the newcomer hospitality, even the sacraments: the bread of life and the cup of salvation. But for whatever reason this disciple was afraid. He did not think himself worthy to be involved in such holy things. He had been told from an early age that he could not sing and for some reason he believed it. Also, once he joined the altar guild at his old church and he didn't iron the linens right and they shamed him so bad, that he couldn't sleep for a week. He was also, truth be told, embarrassed that he even went to church, because most of his friends prided themselves on having let go of all that mumbo-jumbo a long time ago. He was embarrassed, so he never invited even one single person to worship. But when Jesus heard that he had buried this dimension of the gospel, he was upset. And this man was thrown out of the Episcopal Church and he had to make his spiritual home with the Unitarians, where people were friendly enough, but it was just not the same.

When you come up for communion today, I invite you to give thanks for all the treasure you *have* unearthed and shared with other, all those things you *have* unburied and are currently giving away. Just that you are here today, lending your voice to collective prayer, just this is huge. And then perhaps, if you are ready, I invite you to also think about some area where you might feel a subtle pull to share a little more. Maybe in the area of stories and discussion or in the area of compassion, or in the area of worship. Maybe you are afraid, and you don't quite know how to share. Maybe you have been taught to be ashamed. It's OK. Sometimes offering your question, your confusion, sometimes this is enough. Maybe for now, unearth this thing, dust it off, and place it at the foot of the altar. This might be enough for now.

May the Spirit help all of us, in Her own time, unearth the abundance of what we have been given. May she help us bring out that treasure into the bright light of day, for the growth and the flourishing of the Kingdom of Love.