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The Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost November 19, 2023

As We Await the Savior's Coming We Are Faithful

As we bring our annual review of the words and works of Jesus to a close, we remember that Jesus is coming again at the end of time to raise all bodies from their graves and pronounce his saving or his condemning verdict on all. We await his Second Coming and we are watchful, faithful, and hopeful. These are themes of worship in November.

Jesus has not called us to fret and fume about the end of time. We are to be watchful but not fearful. We receive the gospel gifts he has presented to us and we use them faithfully and wisely for our own benefit and for the benefit of others.

Sermon Romans 12:1-8

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing, and perfect will.

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

Introduction – This is the week when preachers around the country get into their pulpits and encourage people to be thankful. Of course, not everybody goes to church on Thanksgiving, but even if they don't they usually take at least a little time to say thank you to God. It's the usual list: health wealth, family. If you come to church on Thursday, we'll do the same. All good.

The Gospel for today is about God's blessing, too, but not just the health, wealth, and family variety. Jesus is telling another parable today. This is how the story starts: **The kingdom of heaven is like a man going on a journey who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them.** The point of the parable about how people use the blessings God gives. And we're not talking about peanuts here. **To one servant he gave five bags of gold, to another two bags, and to another one bag, each according to his ability.** Jesus wants us to think in terms of millions and billions, about blessings we can't count or calculate, too much, too many. I can count a lot of my blessings. My 1040 form records my wealth and my medical reports chart my health, but the blessings I have

from Jesus defy math. In Christ you and I are multi-millionaires. The Bible says, **For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.** In our own place and in our own way you and I are 21st century keepers of God's bags of gold.

You probably noticed that Jesus' parable isn't all good news. The good news is that two of the servants took their bags of gold, invested them, and earned a return. The bad news is that one servant—well, not so good. It wasn't that he did less or that his investments went bad. He didn't do anything; he did absolutely nothing. He buried his bag in the ground. And for that he paid the awful and eternal price. There have always been servants like that in the church. They get all the best gifts God has to give: life, baptism, forgiveness, Word, sacrament, time, talents—bags and bags of blessings. But they bury them; they ignore them and reject them.

Why don't we? I mean, why aren't we like they are? It's obvious that we're servants who do use God's blessings. Not perfectly, of course, but as well as we can. And we've done this for as long as we can remember. So what makes the difference? Paul answers that question in today's Second Reading from his letter to the Christians in Rome. He explains why it is that you and I receive God's blessings and then use them wisely and faithfully. So let's combine Jesus' parable and Paul's letter and say this:

We Are the Keepers of God's Bags of Gold

We use God's gold with his mercy in mind

We use God's gold with his people in mind

The letter Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome explains God's plan to save the world more precisely, more thoroughly, and more eloquently than any other book of the Bible. In eleven magnificent chapters Paul sets forth what the words and works of Jesus mean in our lives. He ends by writing, **Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them? For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever.**

And then Paul starts a new thought: **Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy—those eleven chapters--to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.** The reality is that we can't get away from the mercies of God. Every cross we see, every steeple we pass, every church bell we hear takes us to the mercies of God. Every sermon we hear, every hymn we sing, every prayer we say takes us to Jesus. So when we think about all the blessings that God has given us—blessings to heart and blessings to head and blessings to hands—it's natural that we offer our entire bodies—heart and head and hands—**as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.** There's no threat here, no hammer hanging over our heads, no invoice in our mailbox. We don't offer ourselves to God because we must. We offer ourselves to God because of mercy, God's mercy, his compassion, his grace. Old Testament believers laid bodies of animals on altars and offered them as sacrifices because God demanded them. In Christ we offer our bodies as sacrifices to God because he loves us. Paul calls this **true and proper worship.** We offer ourselves to Jesus because he's worth it. The choirs of heaven sing, **Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!**

Worshiping Jesus with our bodies means walking away from Satan and his buddies. Some of those buddies are in our society and some are in our sinful nature, but we're always at work walking away. Paul wrote, **Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.** There are times when we mess up, of course, but there are more times when we don't. The old hymn goes "I want to walk as a child of the light, I want to be with Jesus." That's our song, too. What Jesus says, we hear; where Jesus walks, we walk; what Jesus sees, we see. Paul wrote, **Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing, and perfect will.**

God has placed into our hands bags of gold: spiritual and physical blessings we can't even begin to count. We haven't buried our bags or wasted them or rejected them like so many other servants. Why is that? Why are we

so different? **We are keepers of God's gold because we use his gold with his mercy in mind.** God's mercy always moves us. **We can't help but speaking and living what we have seen and heard.**

What made that servant bury his bag of gold? What a dumb thing to do! His problem was he was more interested in himself than the man who gave him the money. His priority was to protect himself; he didn't want to come off looking bad. That's the way all these servants think. They put themselves in first place in their lives and figure what they have is for them.

The other two servants were exactly the opposite and so are we. That's what Paul wrote to the Romans. **For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.** We don't live in our world alone. We live with Jesus and we live with one another. We understand and believe that we aren't king on the mountain. Before we ask, "What do I want and what do I need?" we ask, "What does Jesus want?" and "What does my neighbor need?" With faith in Jesus, individuality disappears but individual gifts don't. **For just as each of us has one body with many members, Paul wrote, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.** There are lots of names on God's membership list. My name is on the list but so are your names and all our names are on God's list together. So this is how it works, Paul wrote, **We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.** Paul could have used dozens of examples to show how Christians use the gifts God gives for one another. This is a sampling. The first-year seminary student asks, "Do I have the gift to preach?" Retirees with time on their hands ask, "Do I have the gift to serve?" Grandparents ask, "Do I have the gift to teach my grandchildren the love of Jesus?" Someone who is sick or sad asks, "Do I have the gift to encourage?" People with good jobs or substantial savings ask, "Do I have the gift to be generous in my offerings?" Make your own list and think of your gifts. How can you invest them in the lives of others and earn a wonderful return? **When we are keepers of God's bags of gold, we use God's gold with his people in mind.**

During these fall Sundays, the Christian Church Year leads us to think about the end of time. That's what Jesus does in this parable. **The kingdom of heaven is like a man going on a journey who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them.** The God-man Jesus went on a journey to his Father's right hand in heaven and he is coming back. He has entrusted us with gifts too great to count and too precious to appraise. He calls us and he equips us to invest these gifts wisely and well. By his grace and with his power we do exactly that. Bury the bag of gold, and the end of the story isn't happy. Use your bag of gold with God's mercy and God's people mind, and the ending is marvelous: **Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness! Amen.**