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Buried under Excellent Soil: Matthew 25:14–30

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Abstract: That we might focus on the third servant, who buried the treasure in the field, is to suggest that we might be the third servant. Perhaps by mistake we do such burying. More so, perhaps we do not even recognize that we bury the treasure under our good work in theology or worship. Will we risk personal reflection, to consider ways in which our fear, guilt, pride, or shame leads us to the field instead of the marketplace?

May I take it as a given (and that is an honest question; your feedback is welcome) that the thrust/focus of this parable is the third servant? Commentaries, reflecting the Matthew text itself, show some ambiguity: the third servant confesses to fear while the master labels him wicked, lazy. One commentary extends the servant's own word, calling him "timorous and faithless."[1] Whatever the adjectives, the focus is on the third servant.

Then I must correct myself. Whatever the details about the servant, those who practice a Lutheran confession of the faith must argue that "the first and chief article is that Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, was crucified for our transgressions and raised again for our justification."[2] That is, for whatever emphasis is rightly given to the third servant as our Lord tells the tale, it is our Lord's treasure, our Lord Himself, about whom the parable and all Scripture speaks.

It is the proposal of this article that just as easily as the first paragraph "launched itself" in my thinking and writing, so easily I am and we are the third servant. We can certainly excuse ourselves from such an accusation. He was called lazy, but if you and I are taking time to read professional journal articles, it is likely that we are not so lazy. I disagree with the master in the story (and our Master?). The third servant was not lazy; it takes some planning and energy and hard work to bury a treasure. You know how it goes in the old movies and TV shows. It's not enough to dig the hole and put the treasure into it. Then you have to fill in the hole; and then

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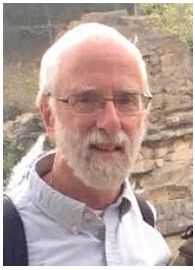

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you have to cover all the traces and tracks. The third servant, after all, did desperately want to return the treasure to the master, kept safe for him until his return. He had hard work to do.

I disagree with the master. . . . The third servant was not lazy.

I can imagine that the energy for the hard work came from his fear. Would this have been something akin to the adrenaline or cortisol reported to kick in for the "fight or flight" syndrome? You know reports of people who exhibit great strength in emergencies. And we can imagine some health and strength in this servant in the first place, for his hard work in house and home, with fields and cattle. I think the master got it wrong: "You wicked and *fearful* servant! You misunderstand me entirely. You could have done more for me with my treasure while doing less for you, digging so deep, if you had trusted me."

I propose that this parable applies to us, to me. Fear? Why, many of you reading this are deeply engaged in ministry, even in leadership in ministry, for the sake of the Good News of Jesus. Why ever would I think that fear might be an issue that would lead us to bury the treasure? Well, OK, sometimes for us the treasure might be buried by accident. Without fear and with good intent we make mistakes.

I make this proposal of mistakes with some evidence at hand. In the office a couple days ago, I rushed to reply to a question, to an idea, because I knew the correct answer. You could tell on the face of the person with whom I was speaking that, while my words were correct, my style was a mistake. I had buried the treasure of God's Good News, God's care for someone, under my rush to be right.

More publicly, there seemed to be a burying of the Good News by mistake, not by fear, in the work of LCMS president, Dr. Matthew Harrison. In his Q&A published for the 2016 Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod presidential election, he wrote concerning Lutheran identity, "Christ's Gospel is at the heart. Salvation is pure gift. . . . What happened on the cross is delivered here in God's Word preached/read, Baptism, absolution and the Supper. We retain the Church's pattern of worship (invocation, confession/absolution, lessons, sermon, Supper, etc.). . ."

I wrote to President Harrison my thanks and my concern. "I appreciate the vigor of 'What happened on the cross is delivered here in God's Word. . .'—and thank you for mentioning absolution, so easily bypassed. My concern comes in your next sentence, 'We retain the Church's pattern of worship (invocation, confession/absolution, lessons. . .). . .' This comment has to do with church history and practice but not with essential doctrine. . . . I regret that sentence. It seems to fail to distinguish between our history and our theology, our changing practice and our Lord's unchanging Gospel."[3]

When this exchange was made public, appropriately, a brother pastor noted to me that my concern was only a small mistake. I agree: a few words would have made the difference, e.g., "Besides our identity, we retain the Church's pattern . . ." As it stands, this small mistake binds the Good News of Jesus to one pattern of worship, thus burying the treasure under tradition.

Before I return to the question of fear or other motivations that lead us to bury the Good News of Jesus, let me acknowledge the richness of the soil in which the third servant buried the treasure. That was my immediate recognition when I heard the proposed theme for this issue of *Lutheran Mission Matters.* Good soil! No doubt the master became rich by running a farm with good soil. Whether the servant buried the treasure in the center of the field or at the edge under the trees, it would have been good, rich, productive soil for its purposes, only now put to shameful use to bury a treasure.

Is there a parallel in John 5 when Jesus heals the man? The religious leaders had concern for the rules which seemed to them so important. They buried the Good News of the man's walking in their concern for his not conforming to the rules.

I wonder whether we could be those religious leaders. The good soil is perhaps not so much rules as it might be excellent doctrine or well-done worship, whether the worship format be traditional or contemporary. The challenge or question of this article is whether we focus so much on doing it well—afraid to do otherwise?—that we hardly notice that we are digging a hole and burying the Good News of Jesus under our good conduct, our theological terms, or worship skill. If you want to argue that worship practice and technical terms are themselves the treasure, then you should risk taking them into the marketplace, at least to receive interest. If we simply tell people the terms and perform the worship, we are burying the Good News under good soil. Will we unpack our terms, explain our forms, so that people hear and see Jesus?

The good soil . . . might be excellent doctrine or well-done worship.

One congregation took the risk; this is a bit of its story.

> In good humor and trust the minister and the people said to each other: "Look, when you come right down to it for us, in this suburb, nearing the twenty-first century, there are forms potentially richer than either a chanted Psalm or the 'Old Rugged Cross.'" They even disbanded the choir, and those who had needed the choir now found some of their needs better met in the team that every Thursday evening (formerly choir practice night) planned the coming week's worship, and some other needs met in introducing and explaining the Sunday worship to their congregation each week….[4]

The concern of this mission observer article might be an educational one; that is my professional thinking style after five decades as a Lutheran educator. Can we, in worship and theology and community service, teach? "Teach" not defined as "telling" but as "engaging people with." And, yes, I'm sure it is possible to bury the treasure of the Good News under good educational practice, as much as under good worship or theological practice.

There is no question about the soil. Good stuff! The question is, "Why is it so important for us to bury the treasure? Not even to notice that we should be heading for the marketplace?"

Let us return to the third servant, to his self-confessed fear. To the degree that I am correct, that you and I in our leadership in the church are in fact burying the Good News of Jesus, I propose that a profound reason is *our* fear. Choose your poison: fear of elders, fear of brothers in nearby parishes, fear of disappointing your (long-dead) mother? Is it possible, on my way out to the field, treasure and shovel in hand, to pause for a moment and reflect? Whence cometh all this energy to hatch this plot and carry it out?! What feelings are mine that may be disconnected from the facts of this setting, that cut me off from trusting the Master about whom I preach "love"?

Is it possible, on my way out to the field, treasure and shovel in hand, to pause for a moment and reflect?

Luther sets a challenge and opportunity in front of us, to confess the sins that we know and feel in our hearts.[5] Often we don't know our hearts well. It may be exactly in our best behaviors that we hide our worst heart. Permit a personal story:

I was a good doctoral student. The professor said to us, "Read one of these books and write a review on it." I can do that. I see that one of the books is short, and it's in the library, free. I'll read that one! It could have been on thirteenth-century Aramaic or how to blow up balloons for Sunday School. Anyway, it's short and it's in the library. I'll read that one.

The book was titled *Adult Children of Alcoholics*.[6] That certainly doesn't apply to me. My parents were both sober. As I understand it, my mom's dad was a gifted musician, Lutheran school teacher, and drunk. But he died before I was born; his drinking doesn't have anything to do with me. But then, "Interesting," I thought, as I read a list of thirteen characteristics of adult children of alcoholics, personal deficits in their lives because there has been such a focus, a hovering around the alcoholic person. "I recognize eight of those in myself, this one in particular, the sense that real life is over there somewhere and I am here on the sidelines. Isn't that the way life feels for all of us?" I thought. "We're not really engaged; real life is over there somewhere."

As I turned the page, this observation greeted me: If these emotional dynamics are not confronted in the family of the alcoholic, the dynamics will pass down through the generations, even if everyone is sober. Yup, that's me. My parents were sober, my grandfather's alcoholism not mentioned, the emotional reality hidden but absorbed—inhaled—while I grew up.

On my way out to the field to bury the Good News of Jesus under good soil, let me ask at least whether I don't see, might even be in denial about, emotional issues in my life that led me to the field instead of the marketplace.

I can take this topic out of the realm of personal story and into the realm of professional literature.[7]

> There is a kind of bondage to preaching—as to any other role or form of ministry—which is a self-investment so thorough that it is more than investment and becomes self-identification. . . . Because the minister and ministry find their center, their justification, [!] indeed the basis for their being in the activity of preaching—rather than in the fuller apprehension of ministry which preaching partly expresses and to which it points—one must unquestioningly serve and defend this activity as though *it* were the saving faith—which, in fact, it is for such persons. . . . Signs that preaching, or one's own preaching in particular, is not having the effect one "believes in" must be resolutely denied.
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> . . . Since one is not a minister who preaches . . . but *is* a preacher, this must be clearly affirmed to self and to others at every opportunity. So that when one seeks him for personal counsel, is visited in the hospital, sits with him in a committee meeting or beside him at worship, one still must be made aware in tone and theme that here is the preacher. Such a minister is not free to minister or in the long run even to preach, because he is in bondage to his preaching, a bondage fashioned of exclusive reliance on it for definition and justification of self and of vocation.[8]

If this mission observer article sounds a little critical, perhaps it is, beginning with myself. A reading recently about a missionary helps me to think through the issue.

> [John] was killed while serving as a missionary. But he was not killed on account of the Gospel. He was killed on account of his unpreparedness. . . . Christian media figures have defended Chau as a sincere missionary: he was. Nothing can be said against his motives or the sincerity of his faith. Liberal critics have claimed he was a colonialist: he wasn't. He genuinely cared for the people he felt called to and had no desire to dominate or control them. Both sides miss a key point."[9]

How many pastors and other church leaders have been "killed" professionally because of their unpreparedness? In all their studies, in all their excellent academic work in good soil, were they left unprepared personally and emotionally? In their self-understanding and relational skills? Did anyone ever point out their needs? Did they ever learn to risk listening to criticism even though, or precisely because, it might expose their needs? Their sins they could confess, perhaps; their mistakes, their deficits they could not or would not. How much, heading out to the field instead of into the marketplace—how much do we insult the Master, unaware, not trusting Him or His treasure, but covering it with our good work?

In all their studies, in all their excellent academic work in good soil, were [pastor and other church leaders] left unprepared personally and emotionally?

In fairness, perhaps the two servants who went to market were also unaware. Simply, they heard his words and went to work. They trusted the master who first trusted them.

There is a sense of newness in ministry, when we listen to the Master's words. "Words—especially religious words, words that have to do with the depth of things—get tired and stale the way people do. Find new words or put old words together in combinations that make them heard as new, make yourself new, and make you understand in new ways."[10] When we take our words and work, our doctrine and practice to market, there can be a return on investment. Otherwise we bury the Good News of Jesus in our use of words, especially religious words, that denies that God makes all things new.

The risk of newness, of engaging in the market instead of burying in the field? "Often . . . the words of a psalm will strike with a physical impact: tears come to my eyes, and I see myself and my life in a new light. The moment passes, as it must, but when I feel both regret over my failings and the certitude that they need not define me, I am inspired anew to believe that not despair but hope will have the last word."[11] The risk is personal engagement, our people's and ours, our hearing how much we are—I am—loved.[12]

If we prefer not to hear such comment from a woman with Roman Catholic connections, perhaps we can hear this: "While Thomas [Aquinas] seeks wisdom for its own sake, Luther always wants to draw the implication of a given doctrine for our faith. He does not just want to know God; he wants to know God *for us*. Theology for Luther, then, is not a cognitive exercise, but a practical one; a form of confession or prayer. . . . In the same vein, the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* defines faith as 'that worship which receives the benefits that God offers. . . . God wants to be

honored by faith so that we receive from him those things that he promises and offers.'"[13]

If I understand the professional readings well, the likelihood increases that we hardly notice ourselves on the way to the field to bury the treasure if we have had (denied or undiscussed) Adverse Childhood Experiences. We have learned good behavior; we're good; we can cover up bad "stuff."[14] But if the "good behavior" we learned puts us in denial about ourselves, our "masters," and the world around us, we may be very skillful buriers and actually insult the Master. Alternately, we may have well learned "bad" behaviors, unhealthy ones. "Adult health-risk-taking behaviors . . . are often an individual's attempt at coping and self-regulating the experiences of emotional pain, anxiety, anger and/or depression related to unresolved adverse childhood experiences."[15]

The likelihood increases that we hardly notice ourselves on the way to the field.

Of course, we are all self-aware. We are not in denial. Most of us reading this article hold a BA and likely some kind of master's degree, at least. We're intelligent. We know what's going on. Or not. I was twenty-five years old. My wife asked me to go out and close the garage door, to push it down the last six inches. She correctly observed that I slammed it. Of all the things she could have said when I came in, she said, "I think you're angry." My response?—internal—"Is that what that is?" For good growing-up reasons, it took that long for me to begin the journey to emotional self-awareness. How's your journey going? How easy to head out to the field, unaware.[16]

Permit a gender focus.

> "If you are 'manly,' . . . You don't admit that you have been programmed, automated, scripted. You insist that you are supremely in control, in charge of your life (and many other lives, too). You don't admit that you are playing out other people's plans for your life, puppet to their strings even—maybe especially—when you most act 'in charge.' . . ." What we do know about [Mary's] Joseph from the Bible and what does make him a close model for modern men's lives is his mute obedience; his steadfast acquiescence; . . . his eagerness to play out energetically and unhesitatingly the script assigned to him, without pausing to question. . ."[17]

Perhaps the issue is (unrecognized?) shame, rather than fear or guilt or pride. A counselor, noting the masking of feelings, might explore with a person, "searching out the shaming events in particular, to develop empathy for a sometimes 'unlikeable' persona. . . . By naming the shaming events, the clients come to see that as young children in shame-bound systems they had little power to determine how they would interact with the world."[18] Such people, facing shame, grow to be more

competent people "through breaking family rules and commenting on reality, expressing feelings and talking with family members about [their] own reality."[19] How frequently is it the *church* family rules that need breaking, that need comments about reality and appropriate expression of feelings?

Have I perhaps buried the treasure under not so fine a soil, under too many words? To quote a Hong Kong phrase, "Apologies for any inconvenience caused." I am grateful for your persistence and, where necessary, your personal courage or clarity to read such a critique as this article intends, for our treasure-burying good behaviors. It was my wish in the writing that we would each hear the invitation to pause, as we carry the treasure, to be clear that our Master invites trust, not fear; that the treasure of the Good News of Jesus is for the marketplace—and for us!—not for the field. I am so grateful for a Lutheran heritage and identity that carry the treasure to market in so many ways, so that our Master might richly enjoy the return of many people in grace, in Christ.

Endnotes

[1] R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*. (London: The Tyndale Press, 1961), 236.
[2] SA II, i:1
[3] Personal communication from the author to President Harrison, May 27, 2016.
[4] James E. Dittes, *When the People Say No: Conflict and the Call to Ministry* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 88.
[5] SC (V)
[6] Janet G. Woititz, *Adult Children of Alcoholics* (Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, 1983).
[7] Well, OK, I chose this professional literature because I think it makes the same personal point.
[8] James E. Dittes, *Minister on the Spot* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1970), 81.
[9] Lyman Stone, "John Chau's Death Was A Missionary Failure Nobody Should Emulate," *The Federalist*, Nov. 28, 2018, accessed March 14, 2019, http://thefederalist.com/2018/11/28/john-chaus-death-missionary-failure-nobody-emulate/.
[10] Frederick Buechner, *Now and Then: A Memoir of Vocation* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991), 93.
[11] Kathleen Norris, *Acedia and Me* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008), 276.
[12] I am mindful of and grateful for Dr. Michael Walcheski at Concordia University, St. Paul. He challenged my thinking, that people are afraid of confession because of telling the truth about themselves. He remarked, "They are afraid of the absolution."
[13] David R. Maxwell, "Justification in the Early Church," *Concordia Journal* 44, no. 3 (Summer 2018): 36, 38.
[14] "Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)," National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Division of Violence Prevention, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed March 14, 2019, https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childabuseandneglect/acestudy/index.html.

[15] Teresa Gil, "Adverse Childhood Experiences: Trauma and adult health consequences," *Psychology Today*, Jan. 16, 2019, accessed March 14, 2019, https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/breaking-the-silence/201901/adverse-childhood-experiences.
[16] Peter Scazzero raises these issues in *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*.
[17] James. E. Dittes, *The Male Predicament: On Being a Man Today* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), ix, 3.
[18] Merle A. Fossum and Marilyn J. Mason, *Facing Shame* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1986), 37–39.
[19] Fossum and Mason, *Facing Shame*, 37–39.