

Lutheran Mission Matters



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Articles

Fear or Faithfulness, Burial or Boldness? Charting the Course for Today's Church on Pause

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Abstract: What do God's servants do when the Master goes away for a long time? In Matthew's Gospel account of the Parable of the Talents, Jesus describes such a scenario. He said that the kingdom of heaven "will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property. To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away" (Mt 25:14–15).

He went away. The action Jesus described created a significant change in the lives of the servants. Now they possessed his property. They were the legal holders of the treasure. They were responsible for stewarding the gifts. What should they do now?

The context for these verses is Jesus' conversation about His sudden return and the end of our temporal age. God entrusts His people with His gifts. He is "away" on a journey until the last day arrives at a time when no one expects or can predict. The church has received the treasure. Now what should the church do?

This paper will discuss the two scenarios that unfolded in Jesus' Parable of the Talents and will compare the servants' actions and the master's responses to the church today. Analyzing three episodes in the history of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod as case studies, this paper will recommend a course of action for the church as it awaits the Master's return.



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Departure

It's nice to have the master of the house around. He has the know-how, he runs the business, he makes the big decisions, and he keeps everyone on track and in line. But in Matthew 25, the master decided to go on a journey. The Greek word is ἀποδημέω. This word does not mean a quick trip to the corner store for a half-gallon of milk. It means to be away from the local territory or to be abroad.¹ The distance was far and the separation was wide.

Verse 19 reinforces this truth: “After a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them.” Much time passed before the master returned. What does a servant feel like when the master is away?

Think about Jesus' disciples. As Jesus was about to ascend into heaven, His eager followers asked Him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” They would have preferred His immediate leadership and presence. But Jesus said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:6–8).

Jesus' disciples were entrusted with a treasure while the Master went on a journey. What was it like to be without their teacher and Lord? Acts 1:13–14 tells us they “went up to the upper room where they were staying” and they “were devoting themselves to prayer.” The disciples' lives appeared to be on pause. Together, they stayed inside, waited, and prayed. The Master's absence is never easy.

And so, the church waits for the Master's return. Sometimes He seems farther away and longer in coming than we prefer. Consider three episodes from the history of my humble denomination, the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. I call them “pauses” in the history of my little church.

The first was just before the synod was officially formed. After Bishop Martin Stephan was deposed in the fall of 1839, the high hopes of the immigrants from Saxony were dashed, as confusion and questions began to dominate. What were they to do without a leader? Should they return to their homeland? Did they have any right to call themselves “the church”? With no sanctioned church body, no valid bishop or hierarchy, no official liturgy, no seminary, and no approval from any external authority or institution, what were they to do? Fear, confusion, sadness, and

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despair began to take hold. Pastor C. F. W. Walther, one of Stephan's protégés, was only twenty-nine years old. He grieved what seemed like an erroneous course. The Master seemed far away as the community of immigrants were left to themselves. Their new venture was placed on pause.

The second pause took the LCMS by surprise some eighty years later, thirty years after the 1887 death of C. F. W. Walther. After experiencing decades of dramatic growth and becoming a church body of nearly one-million baptized members and over three-thousand congregations and preaching stations, change began to sweep the nation. Fueled by World War I nationalism in the United States, anti-German sentiment overwhelmed German organizations. Posters that declared, "Don't Speak the Enemy's Language: Speak American," pushed the Missouri Synod far out of its comfort zone. Known at that time as *Die Deutsche Evangelisch-Lutherische Synode von Missouri, Ohio und andern Staaten* (The German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio and Other States), denominational leaders were sent scrambling. At its 1917 national convention, the LCMS voted to drop the word "German" from its name. German-speaking churches became English-speaking overnight. Youth confirmation classes were directed to redo their instruction in English. German-speaking pastors were told that only English would be acceptable. Laws were passed making the German language illegal. These laws were later overturned, but the impact was clear. The rug was being pulled out from under the LCMS. Evangelizing German-speaking people—the sweet spot of the LCMS for the previous seventy years—would no longer be an accepted or practical methodology.

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In the early 1900s, the momentum of the nineteenth century experienced radical disruption. The World War stole young men from communities and churches. Many of these soldiers did not return home. The flu pandemic killed nearly 700,000 people in the United States alone in 1918. By 1919, the LCMS recorded the first membership loss in its history. The 1937 *Statistical Yearbook* of the LCMS noted: "1919 is the only year in the history of our Synod in which a decrease in the number of souls had to be recorded. A decrease of 4,027 souls was caused by the drafting of thousands of our boys for the Army."²

Then the immigration laws changed. The United States passed the Emergency Immigration Act in 1921. New immigrant numbers fell from 805,228 in 1920 to 164,667 in 1924–25.³ A prime audience for LCMS evangelization dried up

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overnight. It seemed as if the Master had packed up and left the LCMS alone. The church was on pause. What was the LCMS to do?

The third pause seemed to coincide with a heartbreaking rupture of the LCMS in 1974. After a buildup of theological infighting and structural battles for control, faculty and students at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis left the institution and severed their ties with the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Relationships and loyalties were tested. Churches and families broke apart. Battle lines were drawn. The turbulent cultural upheaval of the 1960s spilled over into the church. It is still too early to understand every factor at work in this tragic turn of events, but the result was clear: the once-growing and vibrant LCMS of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s began to stumble. The hurt of division and the fear of compromising God’s truth gripped the staggering denomination. The statistical loss unfolded gradually. But the shock, the loss of confidence, and the fear of anything that might cause this to happen again wormed its way into the hearts and minds of LCMS leaders and members. One retired pastor who lived through the LCMS heyday in the mid-twentieth century and the events surrounding the “walkout” told me, “We stopped doing what we did best.”⁴ Even the development of National Youth Gatherings and The Mission Blueprint of the 1990s couldn’t stop the statistical decline of the LCMS. The synod lost about half a million people in the thirty years after the walkout. Then it lost another half million people in the next fifteen years—the same loss in half the time.

There are many reasons for this accelerating decline; however, just as the LCMS struggled in the past, my church finds itself in the middle of another decline in membership, a challenging pause. The Master seems to have left on a long journey.

Servant Scramble

What are the servants to do?

In Matthew 25, Jesus spoke with clarity about the master’s expectations for his servants. Each one was entrusted with precious treasure. The amounts differed, but the calling was the same. The one who “was a hard man,” reaping where he did not sow and gathering where he scattered no seed (v. 24), clearly expected his servants to follow his lead and produce profitable results. More than a simple expectation, however, the master knew that he was giving his servants a power-packed commodity. The treasure he handed over was the same treasure that produced profits for him over and over again. Packed into the treasure was great promise. Off he went, knowing that the talents could do for the servants exactly what he did for him.

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Two simple sentences describe the action of the talent-laden servants: “He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more. So also he who had the two talents made two talents more” (Mt 25:16–17). The word for “traded” is ἐργάζομαι. It’s a word that is rooted in “ergo” like “ergonomics”—how things work. The servants went and put the treasure to work. That verb “went” is important. The past-tense passive participle of πορεύομαι (πορευθείς) in verse 16 reappears three chapters later in the plural form when Jesus said, “Go (πορευθέντες) therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19). Servants go their way to serve. They move. That’s what the first two servants did in the Parable of the Talents. Going, they served as stewards of the treasure. The servants took the risk modeled by the master and saw their treasure double.

Servants go their way to serve. They move.

But the third servant was afraid. He told the master, “I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours” (Mt 25:25). He went, but he didn’t venture out like the first two servants. The verb for his going communicates “going away” (ἀπέρχομαι). It intimates flight instead of determined fight. This intimidated steward collapsed inward and scurried away from the action in order to protect and preserve the treasure entrusted to him.

He probably believed he was being fully faithful. Like the other servants, this fearful steward didn’t lose a dime. Like the other servants, the steward who leaned toward burial and against boldness may have looked in the mirror each morning and thought, “When the master returns, he won’t be disappointed.” But the master’s assessment tells a different story.

To the first two servants the master exclaimed: “Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master” (Mt 25:21, 23). The servants were good (ἀγαθός) and faithful (πιστός). We might think that the master would call the third servant faithful too. After all, the talent entrusted to him was intact. It was in mint condition. After digging it up from its buried location, the servant probably brushed it off, shined it up, and presented it proudly to the master. There was no loss to the master. The treasure was treated with care and respect. The servant may have even checked on the talent every day. He may have pulled it out occasionally to make sure it was not being compromised by the damaging elements of the world. With some fear and trembling, the servant may have been expecting a “well done” of his own. He was faithful, wasn’t he?

The master’s response shakes the pages of Scripture. No doubt, this punch line shocked the listeners. The protectors of the Torah may have been hit between the eyes when the master said to servant number three:

You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Mt 25:26–30)

Wicked, slothful, worthless. Who saw that coming? Clearly, being faithful means more than simply preserving and protecting the master's treasure. Being faithful means promulgating and promoting the gift given.

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Paused, yet Proclaiming

The pre-Pentecost pause in the Book of Acts found the disciples gathered in prayer: "All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers" (Acts 1:14). As they waited, they proceeded to heed the Scriptures and replace their lost comrade, Judas. They didn't know what would happen next, or when, or how, but they knew the Master would return. So they stewarded the treasure.

What happened during the difficult days of pause in the LCMS?

In a May 4, 1840, letter to his brother, C. F. W. Walther confessed: "Thereupon follow the shameful idolatry with Stephan, the sectarian exclusiveness, the condemnation of other upright people, the departure from many essentials of the Lutheran Church, and who will name it all? Every sad look of a member from our congregations is to me like an accuser before God; my conscience blames me for all the broken marriages which occurred among us; it calls me a kidnapper, a robber of the wealthy among us, a murderer of those who lie buried in the sea and the many who were stricken down here."⁵

Walther went on to learn an important lesson. After searching the Scriptures and Confessions, after reading Luther, and after the Altenburg Debate affirmed that the Saxons were truly the church, Walther moved forward with a new outlook. No longer bound to exclusivity and inward thinking, his stirring 1842 sermon entitled, "Bringing Souls to Christ: Every Christian's Desire and Duty," displayed his new outlook:

The Christian looks upon his neighbor with sadness when he knows that the neighbor does not yet know the Gospel. . . .

A Christian might even wish that he could persuade the whole world to know that they can leave their sins and futile life behind and take hold of Christ. The holy desire to bring souls to Christ begins immediately, as soon as the light of true faith comes into a person's soul bringing with it the fire of true love for others. This holy desire is inseparable from a true faith. Whoever has no desire to bring someone else to the knowledge of the saving Gospel has certainly not yet come to know the heavenly power himself.

Dear friends, through faith a Christian receives not only the holy desire to bring souls to Christ. He receives this task as a sacred duty. No one should say, "I am not a pastor, teacher, or a preacher; let them teach, instruct, comfort, and lead souls to Christ. I wish to remain in my own vocation." No. Christian, you are baptized, and through holy baptism you have already been called and anointed to be a priest of God.

Go through all the chief parts of the Catechism and in each part you will find the declaration that a Christian should care for the salvation of his neighbor.

The Christian Church is a great mission-house. Each Christian in it is a missionary sent out by God into his own circle to convert others to Christ.⁶

Having learned a heartbreaking lesson from his inward thinking and blind loyalty to Stephan, Walther wrote a letter to William Sihler on January 2, 1845. He said: "We, who in unbelievable blindness formerly permitted ourselves to be led by Stephan, have special reason to seek out those of orthodox faith. . . . God knows that we ourselves under Stephan had nothing else in mind but to prove ourselves completely faithful to the true Lutheran Church. But there was nothing which caused us to fail in this very thing more than our stubborn exclusiveness."⁷

The LCMS faced the first pause with faithfulness. Walther insisted that the Word of God be put to work, that the treasure was not only protected, but that it was proclaimed.

The LCMS met the second pause with similar faithful resolve. In 1919, as the realization of dramatic change and the beginning of decline took hold in the LCMS, Western District mission board chair and soon-to-be dean at Concordia Seminary, Rev. John H. C. Fritz, wrote: "A Lutheran missionary who ferrets out only the former Lutherans, or the people of a certain nationality, as those of German extraction, is not doing his mission work in accordance with his Lord's explicit directions. Christ, who died for all, would have us bring His Gospel of Salvation to

all. The unchurched, that is, such as are not members of a Christian church, are the missionary's mission material. These the missionary will find everywhere."⁸

At the 75th anniversary of the LCMS in 1922, echoes of staying the mission course abounded. Rev. F. W. Herzberger, the first city missionary of the LCMS, wrote about the core identity of the LCMS as he lifted up outreach ministries to the disenfranchised. Herzberger noted:

By [God's] grace, His divine grace alone, Missouri's faith is *no dead historical faith*, but *the faith that worketh by love*. Missouri confesses in the words of Luther with the Fourth Article of the *Formula of Concord*, treating of good works: "Faith is a *divine* work in us that changes us and regenerates us of God, and puts to death the old Adam, makes us entirely different men at heart, spirit, mind, and all powers, and brings with it the Holy Ghost. Oh, it is a living, busy, active, powerful thing that we have in faith, so that it is impossible for it not to do good without ceasing."⁹

In the post-depression years, as the LCMS faced major obstacles, Rev. Lawrence Meyer, former missionary to China then serving as an assistant to the president of the synod, wrote a stirring call to faithfulness in preparation for the 100th anniversary of the LCMS. It was 1937. A courageous Meyer sounded the Master's call to steward the treasure with boldness:

When we think of the tremendous necessity of preaching the Gospel of Christ Jesus to a billion pagan peoples, to a world driven by lust and greed headlong into another world war, to a Protestantism devoid of Christ, to a slowly disintegrating Lutheranism, then the challenge of our times comes over us with such overwhelming force that only with faith and courage and a Christ-centered passion for souls such as filled our forefathers can we even begin to meet it.

In contrast to that lion-hearted faith of the early Christians and the heroic sacrifices which it cost our forefathers to leave us the heritage which we possess today, we ask ourselves, What have we done, and what are we doing, to make Christianity a moving, living faith in the hearts and lives of men and women in the world? What have you laymen done for the Church today? What have you as laymen done to prove to the world that your faith is a moving, living faith? How many of you can claim the distinction of having been the means of winning one soul during the past year? Is that a harsh and searching question? Let me ask again, How many of you have any reason to believe that directly you have been made the means this year of the salvation of a single soul? I will go farther and ask those of you who are among the older Christians, Have you any reason to believe that ever since you have become a member of the Church you have been the direct means of leading a soul to Christ?

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This is an indictment not only against the laity but at the same time against us preachers. How often have we not preached the Word of God to you, and yet how seldom have we wept over you! How often have we failed to pray, charge, adjure you, to become winners of souls!¹⁰

Just two years before his writing, only twelve new congregations and seventeen new preaching stations were added in the entire LCMS. Some low points were surprising the once-robust synod. But the clarion call of trusting the Master and stewarding His gifts continued to be sounded loudly.

Being faithful—whether during times of expansion or during confusing pauses—meant stepping forward with evangelistic risk and challenge. Faithfulness meant venturing outward, exploring mission possibilities, and bearing the mantle of outreach in a cold and confused world. The perfect love of Jesus Christ drove out fear. Burying the Word was not an option. The call to boldness in theological understanding and action was the order of the day. The treasure of the truth catapulted trembling stewards to tenacious telling of the Good News. John H. C. Fritz summed up the faithful action of a biblical and confessional church well: “In the exclusive doctrinal position of our Lutheran Church is not only to be found its strength, but therein also lies its great missionary possibility.”¹¹

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Faithfulness for Today’s Pause

Nearly twenty years into the twenty-first century, the LCMS is experiencing its longest and most daunting pause. Everything is changing; we don’t know how to keep up. Moral confusion makes us doubt that we can befriend a fallen culture. Biblical illiteracy and devaluation seem to pull the rug of influence out from under the Christian community. Church corruption and Christian hypocrisy push people away from gifts that give life. Disillusionment with institutions exposes our hierarchical, costly, and slow-to-respond systems. Our church is aging. Members are dying. We know our weaknesses and vulnerabilities, but change seems too painful.

It is during seasons like these we are tempted to equate faithfulness with burying the treasure given to us. We want to veer into protection and preservation of what we have—a beautiful and wonderful treasure.

But, as we follow in the footsteps of our forefathers, we, too, are called to have ears to hear and hearts that understand the Parable of the Talents.

What does it mean for the LCMS—or for any Christian church—to be faithful? What is the course of action for the church as the church awaits the Master’s return? Three servant postures are essential:

First, we live lives of **repentance**. We need to repent of putting our fear and confusion before our trust in God as the head of His Church. We need to repent of treating God’s Church as if it was our possession to take where we want it to go and make it look like that which suits our personal preferences. We need to repent of our sinful desire to please ourselves rather than sacrifice for others. We need to repent.

Second, we live lives of **restoration**. By God’s grace, we walk in the newness of life given in our baptisms through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Trusting God’s grace, we let the Word of Christ dwell in us richly, we love one another because we have been first loved by God, and we let Jesus Christ be first in all things.

Third, we live lives of **rigor** in the Gospel. Guarding against fear, laziness, ego, and apathy, we put the Word of God to work. We walk in faithfulness, taking bold risks and refusing to let God’s mission fall from our list of priorities. We trust the promise implicit in the treasure of God’s living Word and try new things to reach new people with the new life given in the Gospel. Yes, we gather in our church buildings, but we do not hide. We fellowship with one another, but we do not exclude. We tend to the important matters of the church, but we never forget that the Master will return to inquire about the gift He has given us. Until the Master returns, we constantly ask, “What’s next in mission? Who needs to be reached with the Good News? How can we bring the treasure to people who need it most? What will help them hear, understand, and receive God’s gifts?”

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While the clergy of the church, professional church workers, and people in positions of leadership most definitely and urgently need to adopt the servant postures called for by the Master, the Parable of the Talents speaks to every follower of Christ. Both clergy and laity need to pay close attention to Jesus’ words. The pause happening in the LCMS—and in Western Christianity—will not be remedied by institutional programs or convention resolutions. All of the Master’s servants are called to serve. The priesthood of all believers—the people of Christ’s Church—are

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called to “proclaim the excellencies of him who called [us] out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pt 2:9).

Rigor in the Gospel means that God’s people do not outsource the *missio Dei* (the mission of God) to the “professionals.” Both laity and clergy need to steward the treasure of God’s Word by digging into it deeply and presenting its riches to a confused culture. This presentation and proclamation must not lazily echo the clichés of our twenty-four-hour news cycles or of our divisive political rhetoric. With a spirit of humility and an intimate and ongoing connection to God’s Word, God’s people must elevate the conversation of the culture so that all people will see and hear the beautiful and soul-penetrating height and depth of the living Word and ways of God. God’s Word *does* speak into the cultural, spiritual, and moral conundrums we face. Will we listen to the Master and steward the treasure He has given us for the benefit of this generation’s brokenness and sin?

Both laity and clergy need to steward the treasure of God’s Word by digging into it deeply and presenting its riches to a confused culture. . . . This calls for the posture of the faithful servants in the parable of the talents.

It calls for an understanding of what faithfulness really is—not merely preserving the gifts received, but proclaiming them in Word and deed by putting God’s treasure to work.

This calls for the posture of the faithful servants in the parable of the talents. It calls for an understanding of what faithfulness really is—not merely preserving the gifts received, but proclaiming them in Word and deed by putting God’s treasure to work.

May the Holy Spirit move us to repentance, bring us restoration through Word and Sacrament, and lead us to a rigorous and undistracted pursuit of faithfulness in all that we say and do as a church. By grace, may we hold firmly to the treasure entrusted to us, courageously put it to work, boldly engage in God’s mission, and rejoice one day when the Master returns and says, “Well done, good and faithful servant!”

Endnotes

¹ Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Volume 2, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1967), 63.

² Statistics of the Missouri Synod 1847–1937. Compiled for the Saxon Immigration Centennial by Rev. E. Eckhardt, Part IV, note 22.

³ U.S. Census bureau, <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/1968/compendia/statab/89ed/1968-03.pdf>, p. 90.

⁴ Conversation with the sainted Rev. Buck Holm, Mount Prospect, Illinois, circa 1990.

⁵ Walter O. Forster, *Zion on the Mississippi* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), 515.

⁶ C. F. W. Walther, “Bringing Souls to Christ: Every Christian’s Desire and Duty,” Bruce Cameron, trans., *Missio Apostolica* (May 1998): 6–16.

⁷ Roy A. Suelflow, trans., ed., *Selected Writings of C. F. W. Walther: Selected Letters* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1981), 86.

⁸ John H. C. Fritz, *The Practical Missionary* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1919), 3.

⁹ W. H. T. Dau, ed., *Ebenezer: Reviews of the Work of the Missouri Synod during Three Quarters of a Century* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1922), 446–447.

¹⁰ L. Meyer, *Torch Bearers* (St. Louis: General Centennial Committee of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States, 1937), 19, 53–54.

¹¹ Fritz, *The Practical Missionary*, 11.