

The Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost
Bruton Parish Church
The Rev'd Christopher L. Epperson
Sunday, November 13, 2011

One of the most culturally pervasive phobias is taphophobia, the fear of being buried alive. It has been the subject of ancient lore and modern fiction and movies. The Victorians were so afraid of being buried alive, they created all sorts of devices to address the fear. One was a casket with a bell on the outside, connected to a line running inside, so the bell could be rung. Embalming was marketed as a means of insuring that an individual was really dead. Even the stethoscope was marketed as a means of telling the living from the dead. Granted, the implications of being buried alive are grizzly, there is simply something wrong with putting something, or someone, in the wrong place.

We bury the dead. We bury objects to hide them. We bury things to dispose of them.

The servant who hides his capital, given him to invest via his boss, makes that curious choice to bury what he has been entrusted to grow. That servant robbed the capital of its potential. That servant chose to hide. If increase is life, that servant chose death through burial.

Presumably, all the servants knew the boss. They knew that he expected good return on investment. They knew that he was ambitious and hungry for produce, even where he did not cultivate. By working through these servants and leaving them for a long period of time, the boss invited them to emulate him in some respect. The boss entrusted the servants to work on his behalf, function with his vision in mind and accomplish what he would, were he present.

Two knew, understood and responded, and one knew, yet did not.

Now, these parables of Jesus can only be pushed so far. They are in no way intended to be entire, self-contained systematic theologies. The parables usually have a somewhat narrow, nuanced focus.

Jesus tells this parable to his disciples to prepare them for the days ahead, when following will be arduous and frightening. How are they to function faithfully as they await the coming kingdom of God?

What does faithfulness look like as they manage Jesus' capital investment?

It is about embodying the abundant, ambitious, all-consuming ministry of Jesus that knows no bounds or limits. Matthew's Gospel characterizes Jesus' ministry as the formation of a community, The Church. The Church is the school for the sinner, the house of reconciliation and vessel containing the food and drink of new life. That Church goes out into the four corners of the world making disciples, baptizing, obeying Jesus' commandments, and knowing him to be present even to the end of the age.

Listening, healing, tending, caring, feeding, loving-one another and the world. Anything less is hiding what we have been given. Anything less is death. Anything less is disposing of our opportunity to respond to God in the abundant, ambitious, risky way God has called and assembled us. Anything less is being buried alive.