Rev. Mike Cole
Providence Presbyterian Church
33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
November 15, 2026
Psalm 123:1-4; Matthew 25:14-30

"Hide or Seek"

"98, 99, 100. Ready or not, here I come!" All of us recognize the sing-song beginning of a game that is as old as humanity itself. I can imagine famous people playing this game: Moses peering around the pyramids counting Aleph, Beth, Gimmel, Daleth; " or Alexander the not-yet-so-Great counting, "Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta, Epsilon; or Noah side-stepping his grandchildren hiding behind hippos.

I know that my memories of this game go back to my earliest days. I remember one time in particular when I found a hiding place so good that no one could find me. Really! After a while, my friends gave up and abandoned the game because they got bored seeking someone who had hidden themselves so well. When I emerged from my secret spot there was no glory, no accolades and no honor awaiting me. My friends hardly even noticed my reappearance.

That's when I discovered two truths: The real object of "Hide and Seek" is seeking, not hiding; Seeking is a lot more fun than hiding. The game really isn't "Hide and Seek," it is "Hide or Seek." When playing this game, we have to choose to hide or to seek; we can't do both at the same time.

The same could be said of the lesson in today's parable of the three servants: the object of life lived to its fullest is not hiding, but seeking. Jesus tells this parable using the unit of money common to Jews in the middle East – a “talent,” which was the equivalent of sixteen year’s income for a manual laborer; in today’s terms it might be half a million dollars!

Although this parable is about three servants, the spotlight really is on the last servant who chose to hide what he had received. Each of the three servants was entrusted with significant amounts of money: five talents, which would be $2.5 million in today’s dollars; two talents, $1 million; or one talent, $ half a million.

Even though Jesus was referring to a financial unit, it is difficult for us to hear the word talent without thinking of what we mean when we say “talent” - giftedness. It’s not too much of a stretch to think of an ancient “talent” of $500K as major giftedness. So, when I talk about a talent, I also mean our common understanding of talent.

The first two servants invested their gift and doubled their money. But the third servant held back and hid his gift. Why? Let him tell us. "Sovereign," the sniveling servant explains,

"I knew you to be a demanding person, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not winnow; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground." Notice that he describes his boss, who has given him $500,000, as ungenerous. Really?

In what world does an employee get a half million-dollar bonus and yet think his boss is chintzy? He hid the gift because of fear, not because of the boss's character. And fear robbed him of thankfulness. Fear forces us to focus on scarcity rather than abundance. When we think that this is all there is, whatever "this" is we want to hoard it rather than share it.

Our annual celebration of Thanksgiving summons us to reflect on all that God has given us and express thanks. Obviously, most of us go over the top in setting our tables with more food than we could possibly eat, but that's really not bad, if it's our way of bragging on God and not on ourselves.

Think for a moment about the Pilgrims and Native Americans celebrating their first thanksgiving, which a native American friend says is the first example of Americans feeding undocumented immigrants. The Pilgrims had lost 2/3 of their original number to death and the Wampanoag had narrowly escaped being wiped out by the Massachusetts. They had every reason to fear and yet they combined their talents and supplies to celebrate having come through a perilous time.

The third servant's fear of failure forced him to retreat and hide that which he had been given. Fear of failure can have the same effect on us as well. In most instances, fear of failure can paralyze us and become a self-fulfilling prophecy. When we live in fear of failure, we tend to hide the gifts God has entrusted to us, and thereby increase our chances of doing that which we fear - failing.

In much the same way that each servant in the parable was given a different gift, we have been blessed with a variety of gifts which God intends us to use, not hide. Our gifts are not the same and we needn't measure our gifts with others' gifts. The two-talent servant produced two more talents, not five, like the five-talent servant. And the master responded the same to both of the first two servants: "Well done, good and faithful servant." God doesn't judge us on the talents we have, but on what we do with our talents.

The fear of rejection is another aspect of fear in the lives of many of us. Many of us are afraid to establish more than superficial relationships because we are afraid that other folks won't like the "real" us if we let our guard down. And so we sleep in the isolated bed we have made for ourselves, pulling the covers high over our heads, when what we really should do is jump out of bed and lean into developing meaningful and lasting relationships. The fear of rejection is an anti-motivator: it moves us to do nothing in our relationships.

The first step toward overcoming our fear of rejection is to recognize that we each have gifts and to claim that as good. Our talent may be a sympathetic ear, courageous insight, forthright speech, a sense of humor, a willingness to be vulnerable, a generous spirit, hospitality or loyalty, to name just a few of the gifts I have experienced here at Providence. I have been amazed at the gifts each of you bring into your relationships with one another in our church and in the community.

Now, most of us don't think of our ability to relate to others as a particularly notable gift, but encountering as many lonely people as I have in professional ministry leads me to conclude that risking ourselves in relationships may be the most talented thing we can do for one another. If we are ever to conquer our fear of rejection we need to see ourselves as talented individuals whom others want to include in their circle of friends.

One of the strengths of this congregation is the strength of our bonds with one another. Almost everyone who steps through those doors for the first time says the same thing – we are inclusive, welcoming and caring. God continues to gather folks into this community of faith for whom relationships and mission matters.

Each of you have been specifically chosen by God to be here. Just think about this for a moment: at no time in history has there ever been a gathering exactly like this and there never will be one exactly like this again. But God gathered this specific group of people today for a reason. If that doesn't give you goose bumps I don't know what will.

God has a plan for us not just take care of one another, but also to extend ourselves to care for others. We already do a lot of outreach and mission, but God is adding to our numbers so that we can do even more. Today is our Pledge Dedication Day when we step up to support our ministry. 2027 promises to be an even better year for Providence because of God's faithfulness to us. We are growing in numbers and in commitment to serving others.

We have a fantastic staff – Kasia is a superb musician and choir director; Jess is a fabulous administrator; Heather produces financial records that are accurate and understandable and we've got a pastor who is sorta ok for an old guy. We have a wonderful facility that is attractive and comfortable. We are continuing to support mission beyond our congregation and hope to engage in some forms of health ministry next year. Our pledges (yes, I make a pledge, too) will help the session plan a budget for next year that allows for continued and even some new ministries, which will usher in some change.

Our fear of failure and rejection is closely linked to a third fear - the fear of change. There's an old joke: How many Presbyterians does it take to change a lightbulb?

CHANGE!!!!!!? Most of us don't like change. Even if we are miserable where we are, we fear that where we could end up could be so much worse. So, we stay put, and resist change rather than admit that our lives are not all God wants for us.

You see, if we accept change, we have to accept that we are fallibly, gullibly, and predictably human. To accept change means admitting to a sense of powerlessness that makes us afraid, and so we resist change and in that resistance, exclude ourselves from the power of Jesus Christ.

Even today, we can experience the power Jesus can bestow on us - the power to conquer fear, find acceptance and lean into change. The power Jesus Christ offers can transform us from victims to victors, from rejects to chosen, and inertia to transformation. It is a power that challenges us to a duel with our fear, armed with faith in the talents God has given us. That is our power over fear - faith in God and belief in ourselves as gifted and talented individuals of ultimate worth.

As God-inspired people, we are empowered to take the necessary risks of life. Many of us keep looking for a safe way to live as disciples of Jesus Christ, but in our game of hide or seek, there is no place where can hide from the risks of being followers of Jesus. Being a follower of Jesus means being doers of the word who are vulnerable, inclusive, sacrificial, grace-filled, generous, courageous, servants. That's risky business in today's world where we are taught that the world revolves around us and our needs.

Jesus' agenda is far different, calling us to put others first. This sanctuary is not intended to be a permanent hiding place, but only a place of temporary respite from the risks we are called to take out there. Accepting that Christ took the ultimate risk for us emboldens us to risk even failure, rejection and change, and trade our fear for faith.

In the game of life Jesus Christ calls us not to hide, but to seek; not to hide in fear the gifts we have been given, but to seek ways to risk ourselves as we share our talents with others. As Christians, our game of life is not hide and seek; it is hide OR seek. So, which will it be for us?

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Charge: Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God will equip you. God will accomplish a purpose in your being there. Christ who dwells within you has something He wants to do through you where you are. Believe this and go in God's grace, love and power. Amen