

Seven hundred Ukrainian churches have been hit by Russian missiles, but it's not only churches. Hundreds of museums, libraries, and monuments have been bombed, burned, or shelled.

Last February, the Russians razed to the ground a small folk museum near Kyiv. Nearby buildings were untouched. Farther east, Russian artillery destroyed a museum. Locals carried out the only surviving statue of its patron saint like a wounded patient.

*Our cultural heritage, our cultural legacy, is what makes us rich and we have to protect it and pass it on to future generations, says Ihor Poshyvailo. By destroying our past the Russians are trying to destroy our future. It's a strategy that comes straight from the Kremlin.*

For years, Russian President Vladimir Putin has publicly dismissed Ukraine's right to exist. *We are all Russians* he said. Many museum workers have been arrested—even kidnapped—by Russian soldiers.

*You don't usually think of museum workers as being in danger, said the interviewer. Oh they are the first people Russians come for, replies Milena Chorna. Why? Well, first of all they are interested in the collections. Where did they hide the collections? What is the value of the collections? And second, museum workers are leaders in their communities.*

Milena Chorna is head of international exhibits at the National War Museum in Kyiv. She helped set up a museum hotline for workers in the war zone to save their collections. Many workers actually moved into their museums to help guard the collections, even as the bombs fell.

In the north, during the siege of Chernihiv, one museum worker moved in with her 8-year old daughter. There was no electricity, no water, no heat. Volunteers trying to deliver a generator to the museum were killed.

Ukraine has accused Russia of looting more than 30 museums, calling it the biggest art theft since the Nazis in WW II. In Kherson, Russian soldiers cut paintings from frames, dragged out priceless antiques, and cleaned out more than 10,000 works of art. *Even so, Chorna said, many museum workers wouldn't leave.*

*Can you explain that passion to me, asks the interviewer? How can I leave these things to be looted or destroyed, if I know it's the history that will last for generations? The value of these items is much higher than the price of my life.*

*Higher than the price of your life?*

*Yes, yes, because the scope of affect these artifacts can have on future generations is incomparable to the scope of the affect that I, a single person, can do for the culture.*

I heard this story in light of the parable of the talents. I was struck by the stewardship of these museum workers. They fear the loss of what has been entrusted into their care more than the loss of their lives. They are good and trustworthy servants who know the joy of a purpose greater than personal security.

Good stewardship of what is entrusted to us—be it our cultural and constitutional heritage, be it the faith of our ancestors—is essential to a hopeful future. Looting our institutions, traditions, norms, and values is the surest path into outer darkness and the weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Being good and trustworthy stewards of our heritage means more than conserving it; it includes a continual testing to keep us faithful to our vision of a more perfect union. To exercise such stewardship is to know a larger purpose that is fulfilled in joy.

The master is preparing to leave town for an indefinite period of time and entrusts his wealth to his servants. The talent was a very large sum of money weighing between 50 and 75 pounds. The REB translates “talents” as “bags of gold.” The hyperbolically exorbitant amount of money emphasizes the master’s trust in his servants; he hands the money over without any instructions.

On the day of reckoning, the first two servants reveal a trust in the master that enabled them to risk everything. The only way to increase wealth at that time, as the first two servants did, was to speculate in commodities or property. They risked it all because they feared neither the master nor failure.

The fearful servant proves unworthy of his master’s trust. He did what the rabbis advised: *Anyone who buried a pledge or a deposit immediately upon receipt of it, was free from liability.* The fearful servant’s perception becomes his frightening reality.

We hold everything in trust. We don’t get to choose not to be responsible, only to be trustworthy or untrustworthy. The difference between joy and sorrow lies in being trustworthy.

What makes the museum workers of Ukraine good and trustworthy servants is not the doubling of their collections: they lost much. What makes them good and trustworthy is their willingness to put everything at risk, including themselves, for the sake of their future.

Fear avoids risk, abhors responsibility, buries treasures, renders us useless, and ends in darkness and suffering. Trust embraces risks, accepts responsibility, invests everything for the sake of the future, makes us good and trustworthy stewards, and ends in joy.