

Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
Saint Francisville, LA
7 August 2016

Luke 12:32-40

The passage from Luke today starts with Jesus telling his disciples, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." This passage is part of a larger unit that begins at Chapter 12, verse 1. Jesus is teaching to a large crowd, "gathered in the thousands, so that they trampled on one another" (12:1). During this long speech Jesus warned against the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, he exhorted the disciples to a fearless confession of their faith, he told a parable of the rich fool who tells himself "You have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." To which God responded, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you!"(12:21). Then at verse 22, Jesus begins a lengthy teaching about worry or anxiety.

He begins by saying, "Do not worry about what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food and the body more than clothing." He then tells them the parable of the lilies of the field. They neither toil nor worry, and yet God clothes them in beautiful colors and majestic splendor. God knows what they need and God supplies for these needs without them having to worry. Jesus invites the disciples to live a simple life, without attachments to material things and without fear. In chapter 12:4-5 the fear is of those who might kill the body. Here, it is the fear that if we act in radical generosity towards those in need, somehow we will undergo hardship ourselves. Jesus says, "Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

I find Jesus' words today very challenging. I don't know about you, but every time I tell myself "Don't worry" I end up worrying even more. Every time I say, "There is no reason for fear," I tend to list in my mind all the things that all of us fear: worldwide terrorism, economic downturns, nuclear war and nonsensical violence in our cities and our world. And our fears go beyond terrorism. For many of us the economy is the truly frightening reality. Many of us are in fear of losing our jobs, losing the material security we have worked so hard to maintain: our homes, retirements, and savings. There are numerous things in our world that bring fear into our lives, and many more that fill our hearts and our minds with anxiety. Think about your own anxiety over your children, your health, your job, your extended family and friends, etc. The list is indeed long.

Can we then take Jesus' words seriously? When he says, "Do not be afraid... it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom," can we trust him at his word? This teaching is absolutely countercultural and revolutionary. Jesus today is affirming that those who trust in God's will for their lives lead lives filled with confidence and hope. And the first mark of that confidence and that hope on our Lord is that we freely give alms, freely share our wealth with others, and freely practice the outrageous generosity that Christ himself practiced. The true mark of a follower of Christ is overflowing love for others, not just as a religious obligation, but rather as an act of the free will, as an intentional decision.

I must add a word of caution here, however. I am asked frequently how I see Jesus' mandate to sell everything and give it to the poor. Let me remind you that the context into which Luke is writing his Gospel is a context filled with expectation for the immediate return of Christ. Many of Luke's contemporaries believed that Christ would return within their generation. Therefore, to spend the few years they had left worrying about material possessions, earthly attachments, and things that did not build the kingdom of God was foolish (Remember the story of the foolish rich man Jesus just told on 12:13-21). Jesus says to them, seek the kingdom of God first and all the things that you need will be given to you. I don't believe, however, that Jesus is telling each of us today to sell everything, give it to the poor, and leave our children without an inheritance.

Rather, what Jesus is saying is that his followers know that where our treasure is, there our heart is also. If we make the acquisition of things our treasure, our heart will always be consumed with anxiety, longing, and need. If we make fame and popularity our treasure, our heart will always be overwhelmed by a need to be accepted, to be loved, to be envied, and to be admired. If we make relationships our treasure, our heart will always be disappointed as it searches for the "perfect lover", the "perfect confidant", the "perfect friend", etc. The follower of Christ knows that Christ has to be our treasure, and that our heart must make it its life's goal to love Christ with our entire being. And we know that loving Christ this way demands that we love others as we love ourselves.

This is the true mark of our hope in Christ: even though we are surrounded by uncertainty and fear, we place our lives in the hands of the Lord and we are always ready to serve Christ in the person of our brothers and sisters. Because we know that it is God's will to give us God's kingdom, we dress every morning for action, we make ourselves always ready, and we become watchful for Christ's coming. The Gospel today tells us that we must be attentive because we don't know the day or the hour when our Lord will return. He will come as a thief in the night and only those who are ready for our Lord will receive the kingdom

promised to those who believe in Christ. This passage is referring to the Parousia, or the last coming of Christ. The injunction to alertness is a call to remain firm in the faith, to be loyal, to be on guard against the temptation to give up when our faith becomes too difficult or too challenging. This injunction is an invitation to engage in an ethic of compassion and love for the poor and the isolated as an expression of our love for God and his Christ.

We must remember, however, that we are watchful and alert for our Lord, and not for an enemy. It is the Lord of the house for whom we wait. A friend who loved us so much that he gave up his life for us, that “we might come within the reach of his saving embrace”. Look at what the Lord of the house does when he comes home: he puts an apron around his waist and he serves his servants who faithfully and sacrificially waited for his arrival. They remained faithful in their faith even in the face of opposition, doubts, and fear. They endured to the end, without isolating from the world, but rather, fully engaged in ministry for the sake of the least and the lost. We too then must be wide awake, quick to notice our Lord, attentive, intellectually active, perceptive and fully present in every moment. The Lord is coming soon and we must be ready.

Even though there is a clear future orientation to this charge to be alert, there is also a very real “here and now” sense to this imperative. The Christ who is to come is also already here. Christ has come and Christ will come again. These are the great truths of our Christian faith. Christ remains Emmanuel, God with us, even while we wait the fullest manifestation of Christ’s reign. Emmanuel is here and we can easily see Emmanuel’s face in the face of our brothers and sisters. The Messiah walks our streets; sits next to us in restaurants, emergency rooms, stadiums and movie theaters. Our Messiah is the worker at the assembly line, the prisoner at Angola, that alone senior citizen at St. Francisville Country Manor. Our Messiah is our brother or our sister who is depressed, isolated, medically or mentally ill or addicted. Our Messiah is the soldier dying in the field of battle, the person sitting next to us in church, the grieving mother who just lost her son to street violence, and the persecuted Christians around the world. The Messiah is here, among us. While we remain alert and watchful for his ultimate vindication, we also remain wide-awake and attentive to his presence among us.

The Gospel today invites us to make Christ our treasure and to center our hearts and our minds on pleasing him, especially in the person of our brothers and sisters. May God’s Holy Spirit continue to help us recognize Christ’s presence among us today and always. Amen!