

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 12:32-40
August 11th, 2019
The Rev. John Forman

Jesus said to his disciples, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. 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.

"Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves.

"But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

"Do not be afraid, little flock," Jesus says to his followers, "for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom." Ponder *that* for a moment! The notion that God is delighted at all is not common knowledge. Or at least, not common enough.

There is something even more astonishing in what follows.

Because what comes after that stunning revelation is not a list of behaviors that will earn a ticket into the Kingdom. What Jesus offers instead is the way to find that part of the Kingdom that has already been given to us and to live into that. And the way we live into that gift is by experiencing it as it passes through us into the lives of others.

There is something in Luke's Greek word "basileia" that carries a nuance that we miss in the English that we hear appropriately enough as "kingdom." God's good pleasure is in giving us not only a taste of the Kingdom of heaven; the Greek word also implies that the desire of God's heart is to grant us the right to act with a certain royal authority and divine dignity to serve God's creation; to blend our lives with God's on-going creative action.

And there are several ways for God's children to respond. We can take the rest of this reading as a command. That response works well for many people. Tom Landry, the legendary coach of the Dallas Cowboys, insisted that his players never dance and celebrate in the end-zone after a touchdown because he wanted them to act like they had been there before. And so, maybe hearing Jesus command that we act like we've actually experienced God's kingdom works for some of you in the same way.

Some of God's other children hear the rest of this passage as an invitation. A subtle distinction that offers an opening to freedom rather than a pressure to comply. Either way, we can pursue viable courses of action to care for others, to give ourselves in service and to provide alternatives to fear because we have found security and confidence in our relationship with God.

Here again, there are different paths to take. Some people hear Jesus talking about renouncing all worldly goods. Some give literally everything away and join religious communities. To be fair, Jesus does say for his followers to sell their possessions and give alms, although in this passage he does not insist that people sell *all* that they have.

Many of God's children discover the joy of giving what they have earned to charity for people or situations in need. While there is pleasure in doing a kindness or giving a gift to someone you love, there is a different and lasting satisfaction in offering kindness or gifts to people or conditions that we don't personally know.

These acts produce joy because they echo what God is like. We taste a bit of God's delight when we act on our own loving, generous, gift-giving impulses. There is something in this kind of giving that resembles a defining characteristic of Luke's Jesus. The Christian term, *kenosis*, (referring to "self-emptying") is often deeply misunderstood (sometimes, I think, intentionally), so let's call it "non-attachment."

Kenosis as "non-attachment" doesn't mean be emotionally *detached* from your loved ones. It doesn't mean being *unattached* from your hopes and desires. Non-attachment doesn't mean we don't own possessions or titles or roles. It means we aren't owned by our possessions, titles or roles. Non-attachment is not about pushing things away. Instead, it is a practice of allowing possessions, situations and perspectives to arise and go away without either stubbornly clinging to them or automatically rejecting them.

The particular expression of non-attachment that Jesus embodied has a spaciousness to it, an openness to God's creative influence and divine energies. And, following Christ's example, we too can flow with God's divine nature to the extent, with God's help, that we can remain non-attached and open to God.

If we strip away everything that is not the kingdom, what is left is a gift from the Divine Father; an experience of what the Orthodox call "the uncreated light of Tabor." After everything else drops away – our convictions, all that we think we own, and especially our over-confident sense of control – after we let go of everything that is *not* the unfailing treasure of heaven, we

are left with our trustworthy relationship with God. We notice that the Son of Man is already with us, having arrived at a truly unexpected hour, and is preparing to serve us an intimate feast of freely given love that liberates.

To participate in the life of God is the hope at the heart of the spiritual journey. St. Athanasius wrote, "The Word became man so that man might become God" (and I know that Athanasius would include women in that!) That hope and desire is captured in the prayer at the altar over the mixing of water and wine: "By the mystery of this water and wine, may we come to share in the Divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity."

What that means in practice is that, with God's help, we hope to receive the fullness of God's Divine love until it spills out of us like a rain-barrel after a deluge, overflowing joyfully into every nook and cranny of creation. In answer to that hope, Jesus says: "'Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

But if we allow our possessions or our assumptions to own us, we are bound by them; we are shackled to them as surely as if we are chained. To safeguard them costs our time, our energy and our attention. We can become so focused on clutching these things to our hearts that we can't see God waiting for us to wake up and recognize what is truly "treasure" and what is not.

If, instead, we will relax the grip our possessions or our assumptions have on us, we can be dressed for action with our lamps lit. We can be ready to receive and share the Divine presence.

The Orthodox call the practice of sustaining this receptive stance "guarding the heart." It is a practice of awareness that creates in our hearts and minds a purse that will never wear out. That is to say, guarding the heart preserves a container, an open space, with enough flexibility to prevent us from being distracted or pulled around by mindless reactions of allure or repulsion.

Guarding our hearts allows us to be both vigilant and yet non-attached. The flexibility in that awareness allows us to love in such a way that the people we love feel free, and we, in turn, can be loved in ways that make us feel free.

Vietnamese Zen master, Thich Nhat Hanh once wrote: "The most precious gift you can give to the one you love is your true presence." Right there is the treasure, God's true presence, that waits for us to receive and to radiate. God's delight is in giving us that love to embody for others, so that we and God through our actions can be present to them. So that we and God

through our eyes can recognize and truly see them, especially when they are suffering.

When you come to this table in a few minutes, recognize what you receive at this table. Christ, our host and our gift, is given for God's good pleasure to God's beloved children. Receive this gift as a recognition of your own inherent self-worth and dignity. And then carry that love out with you to be present and recognize everyone you encounter as similarly beloved and deserving of self-worth, dignity and God's good pleasure.

The kingdom that God gives cannot be held. We encounter it only as we give it away in our relationships and in humble service. The more we live this kingdom out, the more we lay up unfailing treasures in heaven, not only for ourselves, but for all people. The more we live this kingdom out, the more we encounter and encourage the divine reality of who we most deeply and truly are.

We are children born into God's community. We deepen our awareness of the meaning and purpose of our lives by trusting the God who gave life to us and by giving ourselves away in the love of God.

Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Holy Father's delight and desire to give you these gifts.

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