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Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, August 11, 2019
9th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 19/Proper 14/Year C
Primary Text: Luke 12:32-40
Sermon Title: “*Be Prepared & Have No Fear*”

Theme

Jesus says, “It is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” It is God’s promise from the beginning—to Abraham, to the early church, and to the “little flock” of which we are a part today in assembly. Faith, God’s baptismal gift, trusts the promises of God. Have no fear.

Text

[Jesus said:] ³²“Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. ³³Sell 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. ³⁴For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

³⁵“Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; ³⁶be 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. ³⁷Blessed 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. ³⁸If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves.

³⁹“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. ⁴⁰You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

Sermon

The Gospel Reading seems schizophrenic to me. The first verse is rather pastoral. Jesus called his followers his "little flock" and that sounds cute and cuddly to me, maybe to you too. And to his "little flock" he said,

³²“Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

And that sounds great. He, the great shepherd of the sheep, taught his followers that not only would he keep them safe, that is the role of the shepherd, and therefore there was no reason to fear, but also that it is their Father's good pleasure to give them the kingdom. A reminder, Jesus had just taught them how to pray a chapter ago (11:2ff) where he introduced the concept of calling God, their heavenly Father, a radical concept at that time.

Jesus said that it is our Father's good pleasure to give us the kingdom. Have you ever meditated on that? Have you ever meditated on what God the Father's kingdom must be like? I have and I encourage you to do that.

There is a bizarre description of a city made of gold and jewels and crystal in Revelation 21,

¹⁸The wall is built of *jasper*, while the city is pure *gold*, clear as glass. ¹⁹The foundations of the wall of the city are adorned with every jewel; the first was jasper, the second *sapphire*, the third *agate*, the fourth *emerald*, ²⁰the fifth *onyx*, the sixth *carneian*, the seventh *chrysolite*, the eighth *beryl*, the ninth *topaz*, the tenth *chrysoprase*, the eleventh *jacinth*, the twelfth *amethyst*. ²¹And the twelve gates are twelve *pearls*, each of the gates is a single pearl, and the street of the city is pure gold, transparent as glass.

I would advise against you getting locked into a literal interpretation of that passage. But what I am confident in saying is that the our Father's Kingdom is without a doubt more glorious than our ability to imagine it. And to come back to the Gospel Reading for today, Jesus said it was the "Father’s good pleasure" to give it to us. All that is ours, the faithful, that is.

Ah, if only Jesus would have stopped talking right there, we would be so happy. God does all the work and we do nothing.

But he doesn't stop at the end of verse 32, does he? He went on, and what he had to say is disturbing to those of us who are so blessed.

³³Sell 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. ³⁴For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Umm, he had to go there didn't he? Things were going so well. We had visions of inheriting the jewel-encrusted gold-lined streets of the Kingdom of God.

But then he went on: sell all my stuff and give my money to the poor, and trade all my life's ambition into being a do-gooder.

I'm not going to ask for a show of hands or anything, but do you agree with me, this is where it gets difficult?

Last Thursday morning, one of the regular abusers of the church's benevolence stopped in for assistance. I reminded him that our food distribution ministry was the third Saturday of each month like it has been for years. In talking with him, I asked him why he didn't work, since there are "help wanted" signs everywhere. He told me most employers only take applications on line and then require an email address, and he didn't know anything about all that. So I told him to come back Monday afternoon and I would give him a short course on computers and the internet and give him an email address and help him fill out an online application. Ask me next week if he shows up. I'll bet right now that he doesn't show. He doesn't want my help. What he wants is \$20 so that he can buy some food (or whatever) right now because he is hungry. I want to give him more than that. I want to give him the help he needs to get a job so that he can provide for himself for the rest of his life. "What a bum," we say under our breath. "I'm glad I'm not like that," we say under our breath.

Jesus said it is his Father's good pleasure to give us the Kingdom – man that sounds good! Give me some of that kingdom!

But then he said, sell that stuff that is holding you back and give your money away so that your hands will be free and available to accept the grace of God. That old stuff can be stolen and get rusty and broken anyway. The stuff of the Father's Kingdom though, now that stuff will last into eternity.

What's your decision? Hmm. Are you still wondering why I told you that story about the guy who came looking for assistance for his present needs? Do you see how we are just like him? God is willing to give us so much more than we even dare ask for, and yet we aren't willing to give up the our present situation to take on what God has in store for us.

Then the passage seems to transition, and to be honest, aren't we glad it does! But then we notice that verses 35 and beyond seem like a warning, and the Son of Man is identified as the thief in the parable! What is up with that?

Yea, that is an unfortunate linking, but what Jesus was doing here should not be taken as a warning, but as an invitation. Remember, the crowd he is speaking to was a very large crowd that was probably made up of Jews of every walk of life, peasants and the rich, the illiterate and the learned, maybe even some religious professionals. They are not very clear about anything Jesus was preaching about, because he was already known for turning everything they thought they knew upside down.

And what he told them about the God they worshiped was that God was not an angry score-keeping malevolent God that could be placated by their sacrifices. On the contrary, in this passage and others, Jesus taught that the God they worshiped was loving and forgiving, and desperately wanted a relationship with them, and has a great life planned for them NOW, and in the future. But they, ... we, have to be able to separate ourselves from the things that hold us back. And bringing this forward to us in our modern day, that means the things we guard the most, and for most of us it is our money.

Speaking of imagining, imagine how much money this church would have to do ministry with if every member tithed a full ten percent before taxes. But I digress.

"But pastor, you don't know my life, and my expenses and the things I have to do." Yes, you are right, I don't know your situation. God revealed in Jesus Christ cares

deeply and says to each of us, "Do as I've commanded and I will prosper your obedience."

In the First Reading, long before God was as well-known as God is today, God told Abram (not yet Abraham) that he was going to be the leader of God's chosen people, that he was going to have to pick up and go to a land far away that God was going to give him. And when Abram asked God why him, after all he was just a lowly shepherd without even one heir, God said that he would give him as many ancestors as the stars in the heavens, and he would be the father of many nations.

Think about the faith and trust that Abram had to have. Imagine him having to go back in the tent and tell his wife Sarai that he had just spoken to God and God had told him all this stuff. Wouldn't you have liked to have been a fly on that wall?

Here is my point, we, you and I, are not that special. Obedience to the commands of God have never been easy. Having faith in a God we cannot see is not a new concept. Trusting that everything will be just fine if we were to give of our time, talent, or treasure, has never been easy.

"But pastor, you don't know our life and all the demands we have with active kids and sports and responsibilities." Really? I don't? I would love to tell you that I am the perfect example of faithfulness, but I struggle the same way you all do. And I pray daily that I become more obedient, more willing, more trusting. Do you?

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

This week, I would like to ask you to meditate on the Kingdom of God, let your mind go wild in imagining what it looks like – I assure you, what God has in store for us, is far greater. We have nothing to fear.

But then, like almost every week, I hope you take the bulletin home with you and reread these passages and reflect on what I have said. God loves us and has great plans for us, and wants to make us heirs of his Kingdom. That is not a warning, it is an invitation. And Jesus encourages us to prepare ourselves to receive it.

Prayer

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Heavenly Father, we are sorry that we practically make you beg to get our attention, and that like Abram, we are reluctant to trust you with our future, both now and in your eternal future. Open our hearts to the riches of your grace, that we may be ready to receive and obey you now, and into the future. We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen