

Aug. 7, 2016 -12th Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 12:32-40

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This is the 3rd Sunday in our sermon series reflecting on the question “Who is Jesus?” Today’s gospel reading suggests that Jesus is a wise, reassuring, and encouraging older brother, and our role model for living God’s way of life.

To get the full impact of today’s gospel reading we need to go back and pick up the context for what Jesus is saying to the disciples, where Luke writes, “Do not be afraid, little flock. . .” In last week’s gospel Jesus talked about greed and the kingdom preference of living rich toward God. He told the parable of the rich man blessed with a bumper crop who built bigger barns and was all wrapped up in himself, and content living that way.

The lectionary cycle then leaves out the portion of Luke 12:22-31. It is the well-known passage given as an imperative directing us not to worry about food and clothing, reminding us that God cares for the birds of the air and lilies of the field. Hear the paraphrase from “The Message” of those earlier verses 22-31 which lead into today’s gospel passage:

“Jesus continued this subject with his disciples. “Don’t fuss about what’s on the table at mealtimes or if the clothes in your closet are in fashion. There is far more to your inner life than the food you put in your stomach, more to your outer appearance than the clothes you hang on your body. Look at the ravens, free and unfettered, not tied down to a job description, carefree in the care of God. And you count far more.

“Has anyone by fussing before the mirror ever gotten taller by so much as an inch? If fussing can’t even do that, why fuss at all? Walk into the field and look at the wildflowers. They don’t fuss with their appearance – but have you ever seen color and design quite like it? The ten best-dressed men and women in the country look shabby alongside them. If God gives such attention to the wildflowers, most of them never even seen, don’t you think God will attend to you, take pride in you, do his best for you?

“What I’m trying to do here is get you to relax, not be so preoccupied with *getting* so you can respond to God’s *giving*. People who don’t know God and the way God works fuss over these things, but you know God and how God works. Steep yourself in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. You’ll find all your everyday human concerns will be met. Don’t be afraid of missing out. You’re my dearest friends! The Father wants to give you the very kingdom itself.” [Eugene Peterson, in *The Message*].

And so today’s gospel begins: “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” “*Do not be afraid*” that you won’t have food and clothing. Why? Because “it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” It pleases God, delights God to give to us, to provide for us.

So what is this kingdom like that God has given us? First off, it is now here, but not yet completely here. We are not talking about something that comes to us as a reward for being good when we die. God's kingdom is that state of being where God's rule is in place, God's intended way of life for all creation is the norm. It might be helpful to start with what is NOT part of God's kingdom: Not worry. Not fear. Not envy or jealousy. Not want. Not pride or selfishness or greed. Not violence or meanness or hatred or revenge. Not grabbing for position, power, or prestige. Not pain or suffering.

This is a way of life that is safe and secure, a realm full of love and truth, light and beauty, joy and peace and justice, and health and wholeness. Where every living thing has what it needs to be whole, connected to, and in harmony with God and the rest of creation. It sounds like a utopia, doesn't it – an impossible fantasy, something of a "wish dream".

Yet Jesus, our brother, came to usher in God's realm, this way of healthy, whole, compassionate and peace-filled living. One of the difficulties for us is that it's hard to live in this "now, but not yet fully here" kingdom time. We are at one and the same time living in a wounded and fractured world, and yet we are also citizens and partners with God in fashioning a re-created world where we live in the way God originally intended – peacefully, mercifully, compassionately, generously.

Here's a picture of the difference between the kingdoms of this world and God's reign. One night a man had a vision of heaven and hell. First he was taken to see hell. He was ushered into a large room, with a table that spread out for as long and as far as the eye could see, a table laden with the most sumptuous food and drink of every kind you could ever imagine. Delicacies from every nation on the planet. Every bit of it looked delicious and the smells were tantalizing. Around the table sat myriads & myriads of people, each with a long-handled spoon fastened to each of their wrists, so that when they bent their arms, there was no way to get the spoon into their mouths. The people who were seated around that table for as far as the eye could see were hungering and thirsting & tormented, unable to eat one bite or drink one sip from that banquet that went on for eternity. The man was glad when it was time to leave that part of his vision behind.

He was then taken to view heaven. He was shown to a room exactly like the one he had seen in hell. There was an infinitely long table, laden with delicious food and drink of every kind, from every nation in the world. And there were people seated around this table, too, as far as the eye could see, uncountable, myriads upon myriads. And these people, too, had long-handled spoons tied to their wrists. But this scene was altogether different. Here there was laughter and singing and joy and peace, as well as every person eating their fill from the banquet table. The difference was that here the people were reaching across the table and feeding each other.

Jesus told the disciples that God's kingdom was about living out in real time that second scenario of heaven - NOW. Through Jesus, God gave the disciples and all believers to come after them, the power to begin to do just that – to love and give in order to sustain

others – now – and not to focus on getting for ourselves, content with some future reward “in the sweet by and by”.

Because God’s rule is not yet completely realized, we, as followers of Jesus and keepers of the faith, living with bodies, minds, hearts, and spirits firmly earthbound, yet redeemed and rooted in God’s reality and God’s time, we sometimes find it really tough to live in this “now and not yet” realm with hope, expecting good things. We look around us at the world in which we live, and it can be hard to see signs of God’s kingdom coming, signs of mercy, forgiveness, compassion, and justice. Sometimes we respond to God’s good and gracious giving, not as fully committed followers, but more like “functional atheists”. That is, we say that we believe in God, believe in God’s unbounded love and generosity, believe that God delights in giving us all things good, but our actions say otherwise. We are too easily beset by worry and fret to boldly live out our belief in the certainty of God’s love. We’re just not sure about this God of abundance..

So we need daily to exercise our faith muscles, as the epistle reading began – “now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Our task as disciples of Jesus is to respond to God’s bounty of love and goodness more and more by giving love away. God’s love is not intended for us to keep for ourselves, for our own comfort and happiness. God delights in giving us all we need so that we can give to others who do not yet have what they need – safety, shelter, food, water, clothing, health, hope, companionship, community, and the good news of forgiveness, healing, and restoration.

Weekly we are invited to feast at the banquet table of God’s kingdom, fed here by Christ to be sustained and strengthened in order to give love away as lavishly as we have received it from God. We have been freed from worry and fear and fretting about the future so that we can be givers, just like God who delights in giving to us all things good.

To help us claim the truth of God’s lavish outpouring of love for us that Jesus lived out in word and deed, you will find in your bulletin a 3x5 card that is blank on one side. The other side says: “Do not be afraid. God wants to give you all good things.” In the next few minutes, the invitation is for each of us to write a concern or worry on the blank side of the card. You do not need to put your name on the card. At the time of Passing the Peace, take your card and place it in one of the baskets our ushers will be holding. At the conclusion of today’s service, the cards will be in one basket, which will be located on the table in the rear of the church. If you put a card in, take one out. Then pray this week for the concern and the person who has written the concern on the card. It doesn’t matter that we don’t know exactly for whom we are praying. God knows.

As we pray for each other this week, we will be living more fully into our identity as daughters and sons of God's kingdom, doing what our elder brother Jesus did – faithfully loving, reassuring, and encouraging each other. May our praying remind us that we cannot out love or out give God, whose pleasure is to give us all things good, for our healing and wholeness, and for the healing and wholeness of this world God created and loves.