

*St. John Lutheran Church*

*The Sermon*

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July 31, 2022

Luke 12:32-40

In the gospel lesson for today, Jesus says some comforting things and some challenging things. Here is one comforting thing he says: “Do not be afraid. . .it is the Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” Sometimes I think we get the idea that God must be some bearded old man in a robe, holding a clip board. God might say, “Well, you did a good thing on April 19, 2018, and another good thing on November 5, 2021, but over here on the other side, there’s all these bad things you did on all these dates. I don’t know. I might not be able to let you in.

Or else God is a bearded old man in a robe holding a clip board, and he says, “Well you believe this and this and this. But over here, it says you have your doubts. You don’t necessarily believe that or that or that. I don’t know about you. I’m not sure whether you belong with all the good people in heaven.”

No. God is not like that. God delights in giving us the kingdom, the realm, the presence, the hope, the laughter that runs beneath every atom of creation, every fiber of existence.

That realm of God, that laughter does not just wait for us beyond the grave, so that when we die we get to go to heaven. It does wait for us then. It also breaks into this time, this day, this place right now, with you.

God is delighted we are touched, when we become a part of, when we see the beauty and the hope of God which surrounds us all the time.

And here is how to see that beauty, to feel that touch. God wants us to trust. God wants us to trust God, and Jesus. “Do not be afraid,” says Jesus. We might say, “What, are you nuts? Of course we’re going to be afraid. Have you listened to this guy? He’s a red-eyed, raving radical.” “Sell your possessions, give alms, make treasure in heaven.”

Wait, that’s a great idea to make money for the church! Here’s the deal: You give money to the church on earth, and you get a chest full of gold and jewels in heaven. We could even have a price list. You give a hundred dollars to the church, you get an amethyst in your treasure chest in heaven. Two hundred dollars gets you an emerald. Five hundred gets you a ruby, and a thousand gets you a bright, shining diamond. How’s that? We would even have a plaque in the front hall: “The Diamond Club.” Don’t you want to be in The Diamond Club?

What do you think. You think that will work? No?

No, of course not. That won’t work, because that’s not what God is like. So what is Jesus talking about here?

“Sell your possessions and give alms.” That means, give money to help people who are having a hard time.

I have to make a confession, as a pastor. (Don’t worry, it’s not too bad.) I probably am not going to sell all my possessions and give the money to people who are poor. Probably not, for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is that if I come home to my wife, Thyne, and say, “Hey Thyne, good news! I’ve sold the house and the cars and the bank account and given it all away,” she will not say “Oh honey, that’s wonderful.” No, she will not. She will say, “Well, that’s great, so tonight you can sleep on the porch because it’s not your house anymore.” There would be no peace in the home. So I am unlikely to sell everything. Maybe some of you might be similarly unlikely as well.

But when is the last time you or I sold anything and gave the money to God’s work in the world? When was the last time we chose not to buy something nice or do something fun so that we could give the money instead to help people who were having a hard time?

But this is one way that we see, we feel the presence of God around us. This is one way to feel the realm of God, of heaven embracing us, as it does every day.

Jesus is saying a challenging thing.

And this does not just mean giving money so that people who are less lucky than we are can have a better day. This is the Gospel of Luke. In all of the gospels, Jesus brings an overturning of the world. But Luke emphasizes this overturning. This is the gospel in which Mary, the mother of Jesus, (You remember Holy Mary Mother Meek and Mild.) Here's what Holy Mary Mother Meek and Mild has to say near the beginning of the Gospel of Luke,

God has cast the mighty down from their thrones  
And lifted up the lowly.  
God has filled the hungry with good things,  
And has sent the rich away empty.

This is the woman who raised Jesus. Is it a surprise that he turned out to be a red-eyed, raving radical?

So, when we are a part of God's work in the world, we don't just give money. We share power. We share influence and status, so that people who are not listened to, get listened to. People who are usually powerless, have power.

We do this because we trust God.

"Do not be afraid," says Jesus. "It is the Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom," Not just after we die, though then as well, but also, right now, in our world, today.

Here is an experience I had that I think might explain a little of what I mean.

A long time ago, about a year after my wife, Thyne had given birth to our second child, Isaac, we decided to proceed with our plan to have a third child. Soon, we were pregnant. We were excited and hopeful, but we only told our parents because, well, you never know if something might happen.

Well, this time, something did happen. We had a miscarriage.

Those of you who have had miscarriages or abortions may be aware that, while we may not grieve in the same way as if we had given birth to a child and the lost the child, it's still significant. It still matters. We still grieve.

We were heartbroken. We held it together for the kids, but I don't think I remember seeing Thyne smile much for a while.

But we tried again. And soon, we were pregnant again. We were a little more cautious this time, but hopeful, excited. We told our parents, not much of anybody else because, still, you never know if something might happen. Which, again, it did.

Now we were really sad. We did not smile much on our own. Along about that time, my parents sent us a bouquet of blue silk flowers. It didn't say much, just "For the miscarriages." It was just the right thing. We put that bouquet of flowers high up in our home, and kept it there for years and years.

Also, along about that time, a member of our church named Amanda put the word out that the Berea Child Care Center, of which she was the chair of the board, was in financial trouble. The Berea Child Care Center provided child care to children of families that could not afford child care on their own. They gave the children some good early childhood education, which has been proved to be effective in improving the prospects of children born in poverty. They have more stable lives, get better jobs, do better in school. Also, it allowed the parents to work.

Because the families were poor, the Berea Child Care Center did not charge as much as other child care centers. They got most of their income from donations from the community, and from grants that would cycle through each year.

Amanda told us that they needed \$5,000 to make it through to the next cycle of grants. Five thousand dollars is not much when it comes to running a child care center, or any nonprofit institution. But it was a fair chunk of change for Thyne and me. We figured it would not break us, though. So, we decided to give them five thousand dollars so they could continue their work with the kids in that community.

We sat down with Amanda, and when we gave her the check, her eyes teared up, and she let out one quiet sob of relief. I looked over at Thyne. And Thyne was smiling.

I tell you, that smile was worth every penny of five thousand dollars. Every penny of fifty thousand dollars.

Do not be afraid. Make treasure in heaven. Give your money, time, power, status, importance to people who don't have it, because heaven does not just wait for us beyond the grave. God delights in embracing you with heaven right now, today in this way. Thanks be to God.