

Text: Luke 12: 32-40

Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell that ye have, and give alms; provide yourselves bags which do not age, a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief comes near, nor moth corrupts. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. Gather your robe up around your loins be girded about, and your lights burning;

You are like people waiting for their master to return from a wedding; ready to open the door when he knocks. If the master finds them awake and watching, they are honored. Truly I say to you, the master will get ready to work, and make them sit to eat, and will come out and serve them. And if he comes in the second watch, or the third watch, and finds them awake and ready, honored are those servants.

Know this: If the owner of the house had know when the thief was coming, he would have kept awake and not allowed his house to be torn open.

You need to be ready as well, for the Son of man will come when you are not expecting it.

This passage is part of Luke's central message of Jesus to the disciples. "Fear not" is a consistent theme in Luke, from the birth story to the calling of the disciples, and healings. Fear not, little flock. *Mikro* is the Greek word. Tiny. This isn't to the mass following, the crowds, the 'hochlos' – this is to the few, the sparse, the remnant.

It is God's '*Eudokeo*' – delight – to give you the *basileia* – the reigning, the foundationing (it's where we get the words 'base' and 'basis').

Then comes the really scary part. This is in the form of a commandment. It is imperative, and not suggested. Sell/barter your substance. Give mercy. Be ready. Remember the rich young ruler? "One thing you lack – sell all you have, give it to the poor, and follow me." This is the radical claim of Jesus – and one we are reluctant to discuss. It's easier to deal with arguments about sex and property. This is the commandment we don't take literally, or at least most of us. After all, if we did, where would we be? Why, we'd be without a roof over our head, not knowing where our next meal is coming from, without security. That's scary.

"Fear not," Says Jesus. There is a re-direction of issues and concerns here.

Life isn't really about stuff that can get yanked out of your hands. Rene Girard writes about "mimetic desire;" it's there and you have it so I want it. It is the real basis for competition among human beings. And it isn't just about keeping up with the Jones's or having the latest toy.

The director of our local city's development department spoke to me at a meeting. He said that the city wants to pick a non-profit community based development organization to coordinate funds for programs in two areas targeted for revitalization. Then he named us – Project Vida – and another agency. My immediate response was, "Why even consider them? They aren't located in the target area and we are!" I got hooked into 'mimetic desire'. There was a chance that someone else would get something – no matter that it is a nightmare job, involving choosing which other agencies get funds and reviewing their work as well as our own. I got hooked. I wanted to grab on with both hands and get it – even though we didn't need it, hadn't planned for it, and may not have been ready to do it.

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As we age and become more fragile – as individuals and as a social group – our greatest fear is that we will lose our independence and freedom. We look at what we have, and we're afraid it isn't enough. Millionaires keep working because they don't believe they can afford to relax. J.P. Morgan – a legendary early capitalist – was asked, "How much is enough?" His answer: "Just a little bit more..." Remember?

Jesus' *basileia* – foundation – reigning – is not based on having stuff. It is not a power trip. The basis, the foundation, the reigning of Jesus is based on compassion. Compassion is an alternative to fear and greed. It is the basis of turning enemies into friends, and challenging friends to live in a wider world. Gloria Steinem said in a speech in 2002: "I think that empathy is the most revolutionary emotion."

We talk about being 'selfish.' We talk about the need to have our own needs met as a self. But we need to understand a little more about the nature of the self. The self does not exist as an isolated entity. It is pure relationship. The self is that interior dialogue and identity that emerges in the midst of being a child, a parent, a sibling, a friend, an enemy, a student, a teacher, a worker, a leader – and one who is related to the earth, breathing the air and seeing the sea and sky. The self is not an isolated little being somewhere disconnected from all of that – it is the relationship we take to all those relationships, the relationship we take to all those memories and images, and the relationship we take to life itself.

That self can be large or small. Mary Pipher talks about the human project of creating a circle of caring. There are folks who live in very tiny, very reduced circles. "Me, myself, and my canary" are in the circle of caring, and the rest of the relationships are with 'those people.' It's like the cell phone system that gives you five contacts for 'free calls,' and the ones that give you a whole network of people... There are folk with fairly large circles. They relate to people beyond boundaries of race and nationality, and they relate to the land and sea and air with care and compassion as well. But any human circle of caring still finds itself limited, bounded by imagination and culture, irritations and prejudices.

God's circle of care is all of being and non-being. God's circle of care includes the sparrow's fall, the brilliance of the stars, the grinding of tectonic plates, dinosaurs and black holes, the human race and the creatures of the sea. It is God's delight to give us God's circle of caring. It is God's delight to enlarge our souls – our selves -- to mirror God.

Then to join God in caring means that we sell or barter what we've got and give mercy. We flip our stuff from our own possessiveness and desire for control, into ways to make things work. We give mercy; we heal antagonisms, we give hope, we bring things together, we try to make things work.

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Be ready. 'Gird your loins' meant to get your robe up so you can move. Have you ever seen me try to climb the steps with my robe on? I have to worry about tripping over the hem! Would we say, "Keep your running shoes on?"

Be ready. We don't know when empathy, mercy, compassion will break into a situation. Don't get caught not ready for it.

I was in a meeting on 'Project Access' – which has now changed its name to 'El Paso Health Care Heroes.' We'd been meeting for months, trying to put a program together to set a volunteer system for specialists and laboratories to diagnose uninsured indigent patients from our community clinics. A new agency was there for the first time. We got to choose: Should we be defensive? Should we ask, "What are you doing here after we've done all this work?" Or should we be open: "What do you see here? What part can you play?" The new agency brought compassion. Were we going to be ready for it?

I was struck by the following passage:

*Anyway, I sometimes imagine a small group of people who meet for supper at least once a week to offer prayers and to discuss how the "campaign" is going. I imagine them rejoicing at their successes -- the antagonisms they have managed to sabotage, the secret messages of hope they have managed to deliver -- and rejoicing no less in how small they are in relation to their work. They are "dressed for action" and have their lamps lit. They seem to expect a knock at the door. And yes, yes, they still "go to church." But they go knowing, even before someone official can tell them so, that they are the church. We are clearly a "little flock." God's gift to us has been a release from certain temptations that come with being a larger flock. But our call isn't to our own small circle of caring, our own little kingdom.*

*Garret Keizer*

Our call is always to receive God's kingdom, God's circle of caring, God's reigning. It is the call to radical openness, and radical compassion. It is the call to be ready for a new encounter in an old friend, to listening, hearing, or speaking truth in love.

We really are to see our stuff as what we can use to care for people, because we know that piling it up for ourselves is like storing up old Sunday School materials... and we know what that's like. We really are to barter away our 'stuff' – to barter away the good friendships we've enjoyed, the sense of history of ourselves, the skills and resources we have – and to give mercy.

Bill Schlesinger