

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

A GIVER WHO COMES LIKE A THIEF

Luke 12:32-40

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Analysis by Eric W. Evers

32 "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. 33 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. 34 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. 35 "Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; 36 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. 37 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. 38 If 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. 40 You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

DIAGNOSIS: Beset by Thieves

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Holding on*

We don't like to let go of our resources, do we? Pastors know

this all too well: we see the “offering income” of our congregation, and we think to ourselves, “what if half of our members actually tithed?” (If this doesn’t seem like a dream to you, then thank God for your congregation!) And of course, the more we have, the less generous we tend to be. “Sell your possessions” comes across with such absurd absoluteness that we immediately look for ways around (or away from) it. And, in our current economic climate, generosity and sacrifice seem even more risky to talk about. Yet the fact remains: we do not give, not as generously as we could or as generously as Jesus commands.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Anxious*

We find the underlying reason for this lack of generosity in the flip side of Jesus’ reassurance, “fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” We are fearful and anxious. We crave security. And some vague talk about “the kingdom” generally doesn’t cut it with us. We want our purses and treasures right where we can see them. The world is uncertain! Thieves of money, time, and well-being can be found around every corner. Worried about our place in the world, indeed about our very life, we cling to our money and possessions as bulwarks against uncertainty and mortality. So of course we cannot give generously! We must hold and hoard in order to preserve the illusion of our security. We must acquire and keep to fend off the gnawing anxiety that what is most dear to us could be taken at any time.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Unready*

What is most dear to us, in this analysis, is ourselves, as extended and expressed by our possessions. And where our treasures are, there can be found our hearts as well: set firmly on self. Cold towards the need of neighbor, defiant towards the will of Christ, our clinging to possessions is both foolish and futile. For these things can be taken from us, and the Son of

Man does come unexpectedly, like a thief in the night. When he comes, though, and finds our hearts anchored on our selves and our stuff, then our hearts, and with them our lives, will be taken away. Nothing can secure us from this taking, as they were never really ours in the first place.

PROGNOSIS: Blessed by the Master

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Served*

And yet, the Son of Man comes to seek and save, not condemn. He comes to serve, not steal. We so desperately cling to imagined safety, but Jesus gives security that is steadfast and eternal. He delivers us, by delivering to us the forgiving, life-creating Kingdom of God that turns our hearts away from self, opening us to trust in God alone. Pardoning our selfishness, he freely gives us new life that both calms our fears and shatters our illusions. This servant blessing creates a new way for us to be secure in his love, even in an uncertain world.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Receiving*

This puts us in a new position. Instead of being consumers who must acquire and keep, we become receivers. Who we truly are is not a function of what we have, rather it's the identity we have been given as members of a beloved "little flock." We are defined now by God's unconditional love for us, not by the condition of our bank account. So the anxiety can pass. We can "fear not" as we bask in the good pleasure of our Father.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Ready*

Such receivers are, of course, ready to be givers. With our energy no longer centered on grabbing and grasping, we are free to give. Because we no longer anchor our hearts on protecting our self, we can be moved by the need of neighbor and the opportunity to equip the Church for mission. Generosity towards others flows out of God's gracious and abundant provision for us. Sacrifice can now be joyful, a passing of the blessings we

have received along to others. Our possessions are no longer defenses against meaninglessness, fear, and death (in other words, means of self-justification). They are now opportunities to serve and bless our neighbors in the name of the great Servant who has so deeply blessed us: the Son of Man, Jesus Christ.