

# Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

## THE GIFT OF THE KINGDOM

Luke 12:32-40

### Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 14) Analysis by Steven E. Albertin

32Do 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.

35Be 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.

39But 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."

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## DIAGNOSIS: "The Curse"

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : "Burdened"**

In this market-driven, entrepreneurial world congregations often see themselves in the business of selling the advantages of being a Christian and promoting the blessings of church membership. They surely ought to enrich the disciple's life and like everything else in America offer "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Essential to enjoying that kind of "happiness" in America is money. Maybe we can't all be the latest version of Warren Buffet, but surely we can have our piece of the pie. And the church is all too willing to tie its mission to the bandwagon of economic success. Jesus may not make you a millionaire, but he surely will provide you with economic peace and a comfortable, well-funded, middle-class lifestyle.

But then we hear the words of today's Gospel! What we expected to be a gift and blessing sounds an awful lot like a burden and a curse. In our acquisitive culture the invitation to "sell your possessions and give alms" sounds reckless, even dangerous and certainly foolish. "We work hard for a buck and then we are supposed to give it away?" If this is how we are supposed to invest our lives, if this is what it means to make "purses for yourselves that do not wear out, and unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys," this is NOT what we expected or wanted. This a burden we are not willing to carry and a responsibility we are not ready to bear. If this is what it takes to be certain of our unfailing treasure in heaven, then we will take a pass on church membership or, to coin the more pious-sounding and ecclesiologically-correct label we hear these days, "discipleship!"

## **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : "Afraid"**

The discipleship that we thought was our ticket to success and happiness turns into a burden we want to flee. Why? Because we are afraid. We are afraid to live generously, and unwilling to give our possessions to those in need, and care for the poor. We don't want to give away what we have worked so hard to get. We

have invested our lives, our “heart,” in such treasure. That is why we are so reluctant to let go of it. That is why we are afraid to give it away because, in spite of our pious talk to the contrary, such treasure is our functional “god.” And, as Luther reminds us in his Large Catechism, what we fear love and trust, and are most afraid of losing, is our god, even though we might insist that we are the most devout Christian on the block.

We are all incurably idolatrous. Everyone who chooses to get out of bed in the morning must have a reason, a passion, a purpose, a god. But those gods rule our lives by fear and intimidation. Every knee must bend and every head must bow at the altar of the almighty dollar—or there is Hell to pay—literally!

And so we are always looking over our shoulder, nervously checking to see if our wallet is still in our pocket, quickly searching out the latest word from Dow Jones, carefully walking on eggs fearful that the Fed might raise interest rates, afraid that our church is going to ask for more money . . . again! “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (v. 34). Our heart is not in heaven. Our faith and trust are not in God. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that we are afraid of losing what we have chosen to trust: our money.

And why do we not trust God? Because ultimately, like every person since Genesis 3, we can’t help but be afraid when God comes walking in the cool of the evening wondering where we are. We can’t believe, we won’t believe, that we are numbered in God’s “little flock” and blessed to belong to God’s kingdom. All we can do is run.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : “Mugged”**

It gets worse. God is coming. We had better be ready . . . or else!

Jesus uses two images to warn us of the fate that lies ahead of

us: a master returning from a wedding and a thief breaking into a house. Both are about an unexpected and surprising interruption. Both are about an ominous threat. We need to be prepared for the return of the master or we will not be blessed. We need be prepared for the thief or we will be robbed of what we value most.

The ugly truth is that fate will be ours as long as we cling to our money, as long as our hearts cling to a treasure that is not "in heaven." Mesmerized by the fatuous promises of materialism, we are not ready or alert for the return of the Master. We do not hear his knock at the door. We fail to let him in. We miss out on the party he wants to have with us. We miss out on the blessings of the kingdom. Busy counting our coins and congratulating ourselves on our success (cf. the parable of the Rich Fool from last week), we are unprepared for the thief who breaks into our house and steals our treasure. We might as well have had our hearts ripped out! Of course, that is exactly the fate that will be ours for having given our hearts to such fleeting treasure.

What we thought could save us can't. Christ takes his kingdom elsewhere and leaves us to our foolishness, vulnerable, misguided and soon to be mugged by the thief who will make us pay for our stupidity and arrogance. Left to such a fate we might as well be cursed . . . by God, and we are, because we were neither ready nor prepared to receive the Kingdom God wanted to give us in Christ.

## **PROGNOSIS: "The Blessing"**

**Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) :** *"The Blessing"*

BUT God is determined to get us in on the blessings of His Kingdom. He wants us in his "little flock" even though we seem determined to have nothing to do with it. We may have deserved to be left behind when he took his party elsewhere because we

were so preoccupied with counting our money. We may have deserved to have been mugged because we were so unprepared to intercept the thief. But the Kingdom is not about getting what you deserve; it is about gifts, grace and mercy. It is about the "Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom." God's love will not be thwarted. Such is the currency in the economy of the Kingdom.

So God pre-empted us getting what we deserve by sending his Son who "pays" for us and our salvation. God in Christ chooses to be one of us and like us is excluded from the party and suffers the fate we deserve in our stead. He dies on a cross outside the city, outside of the party. Even more, he lets himself be marked as a thief among thieves. He suffers everything that we must suffer because he chose to be numbered among sinners like us. But "on the third day" Christ is raised from death and God declares that payment has been made.

We are no longer cursed. We no longer need to live in fear and under the threat of being robbed. We are forgiven. We are rich. We have a treasure that will never wear out, that no thief can steal and no moth can destroy. We have the assurance that we belong to his little flock no matter what. We are blessed!

#### **Step 5: Advance Prognosis (Internal Solution) : "Fearless"**

Therefore, God says "Do not be afraid, little flock" (v. 32). Such assurances are at the heart of the Kingdom we have been given. Given this good word, we can be relieved. We can relax. We can believe that there is no longer any reason to be anxious or to worry about the future. Regardless of the size of our piggy banks, our bank accounts or stock portfolios, regardless of when the end comes, the thief breaks in the door and the final reckoning arrives, we can be sure that we will not be mugged. We cannot be robbed. We are blessed with the treasure that lasts forever: the love and mercy of God.

Therefore, we are fearless. We are confident. We are certain that the future is in God's hands and there is nothing to worry about because this God has gifted us with the kingdom. We are numbered in his little flock forever.

#### **Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : "Generous"**

Because we have been blessed, because we have no fear—because the treasure will always be ours—we are transformed. Our attitude toward and our use of our possessions is different. There is no longer any reason to hoard or stock pile. If we accumulate possessions, it is now for a new purpose: to serve our neighbor. We can generously share them with those in need. There is no need to hoard them because we are afraid or to squander them because we are obsessed or to waste them because we are fools.

Jesus' invitation to sell our possessions and give alms to the poor is no longer heard as an unsettling threat or an unwanted burden. Instead it is good news. It is a gracious invitation and a wonderful privilege. Life in the Kingdom is a gift, a "get to," an opportunity to give ourselves away in service of the world, especially to the lowly. Therefore our possessions and our money are not trophies to brag about or rewards to gloat over. On the contrary, instead of seeing them as weapons to bludgeon anyone who would stand in our path on our way to the top of the heap, we see them as tools to serve our neighbor and to welcome the stranger.

Life in the Kingdom is a gift not a burden. Generosity is a lifestyle instead of a guilt-induced act of penance. The church's mission no longer simply reinforces the old world of scarcity where everyone is afraid of not having enough. Rather it lives in the new world of abundance and plenty, the world of the Kingdom, where risks can be taken without fear because there is always more than enough to go around.