

“The Father’s Good Pleasure”

Scripture: Luke 12:32-38

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We continue this morning with a reading from the Gospel of Luke that is a continuation of the text that John O’Kain used last Sunday...a section that addresses our tendency to accumulate stuff and to be satisfied with the accumulation.

LUKE 12:32-40: <sup>32</sup> *“Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. <sup>33</sup> 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. <sup>34</sup> For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

<sup>35</sup> *“Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; <sup>36</sup> 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. <sup>37</sup> 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. <sup>38</sup> If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves.*

One of the composers of what is considered classical music was Joseph Hayden. Hayden’s Symphony 94 in G Major is one of the composer’s most performed symphonies. It begins in a very tranquil and lyrical fashion...just the sort of music to assist the listener who likely has just finished an evening meal to doze...to nod off, when there is a SHARP AND LOUD OUTBURST! And so instead of being known as the Hayden’s Symphony No. 94, it is more usually referred to as the “Surprise Symphony.”

Surprise...surprises are woven throughout our text for today. Jesus says, “Do not be afraid, little flock...” Usually, when Jesus says, “Do not be afraid,” there is something to be afraid of...a storm, a ghost, a threat, a mystery. Here the fear is anxiety about stuff. The fear Jesus addresses is our concern about stuff—what we are going to eat, what we are going to wear, what we have in retirement plan, what we have in savings, will we have enough.

Here is the surprise. God is pleased to give us the kingdom. Here we are anxious about the “stuff” and we are missing what God is giving us. Here is the issue: We focus on what we think we want rather than what God wants for us. So often what we ask for is not what we really want.

Some of you have heard the following personal anecdote: it is a lesson that I learned as a child that is no always best to get what you ask for. As a child and to this day, my father does not feel like an evening meal is complete without dessert...there had to be something sweet to finish the meal. I can recall my mother at the dinner table asking my father, “Would you like a couple of Jack’s Cookies for dessert?” Some of you may remember that Jack’s Cookies were a brand of rather economical cookies. And my Dad he would say, “Yes.” So, she would bring him a couple of Jack’s Cookies. My mother, on the other hand, who also liked dessert, would serve herself a slice of homemade lemon pie...graham cracker crust, puffy meringue, that combination of sweet and sour together. And when my father would complain—here he has some dry cookies and she has this delicious dessert—my mother would simply say, “I gave you what you wanted—you said you wanted some Jack’s Cookies.” And this scene was repeated with variations: instant chocolate pudding versus strawberry shortcake with whip cream and so on. My dad would say “Yes” to what was offered and then would see what a delicacy my mother would have. Finally, my dad figured it out. Today, when she asks him about dessert, he simply says to my mother, “I’ll have what you are having.”

Good choice. When Jesus says “Do not fear little flock,” he means quit making the choice of settling for the “stuff,” and get ready for fog God will give. Now, mind you, “stuff” is not bad. God made a lot of stuff and looked on that creation and said it was good. But too often we settle for the creation and forget about the Creator. We take the Jack’s Cookies when the right and faithful response is to say: I’ll have what you, God, will put into my hands.

So here’s the first surprise, don’t be anxious about the stuff...look for what God intends to give. Then, there is a second surprise: the Father God to whom we pray, “Thy kingdom come”...the Creator to whom we say, “Thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory”...is going to give it to us, the little flock, that very kingdom. God gives it all away. Jesus says, “Do not fear, little flock, it is the Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”

The Father’s pleasure is such amazing generosity...astonishing generosity. One of my favorite folk tales of faith is about the traveling monk and the stone. A wandering monk comes into a village, late one afternoon. He is shown hospitality by the villagers, but one villager looks at the monk very intently...almost fearfully. As soon as the monk had been fed and was settling down for the evening next a tree on the outskirts of village, this agitated villager accosts the monk.

The villager says: “Give me the stone...give me the stone!”

The monk says, “The stone?”

“Yes,” says the villager, “I have been having the same dream night after night that a monk would come to this village and give me a stone, an uncut diamond bigger than my fist.”

“Hmm,” said the monk, “Come to think of it, I did find something on the road sometime back and put it in my pack.” The monk rummages through his bag and found a stone, “Here is a stone that I found, but it is not the size of your fist...it size of two fists.” And it was an uncut diamond larger than two fists! The monk continued, “I suppose you have been dreaming about this stone. Here, you can have it. It’s yours.”

So wide-eyed and astonished, the villager rushes home with this precious stone; his world would never be the same. He was rich beyond measure. All night long he wrestles with the thoughts of the stone and in the morning he rushes back to the monk to give him back the stone and to ask: “Give me what enabled you give up the stone!” In other words, give me the freedom you have to let go of something so precious.

The first surprise is that God has something better for us than the “stuff”...the kingdom in place of the “stuff” that too often dominates our lives. The second surprise is that according to Jesus, “it is Father’s good pleasure” to give the kingdom. Like the monk who is glad to share the stone, so God takes joy in giving away the kingdom.

Yes, God gives away what is most valuable. Yes, God gets a holy kick out of giving. But the gift comes with what seems to be strings on it or conditions or requirements: Be ready, says Jesus. Be like a servant awaiting the return of the master. Be dressed for action and have a lamp lit. Here’s Jesus metaphor: be like servants or slaves awaiting the return of the master at some unknown hour.

Be dressed for action, says Jesus. More literally, he says, “Gird up your loins.” This is a reference to common dress of the day: long, flowing robes...good for “air-conditioning,” easy to make, one size fits a

multiple body types, and so forth. However, a long flowing robe is not particularly suitable for action: running a race, climbing a tree, even going up steps. So, for example, I imagine that most every one of our choir members can probably tell of you time they were hurrying up steps in their robes and stepped on the hem and either caught themselves from falling or they went completely down. Robes are not made for energetic activity. What you do to a robe to make it more fit for action is you hike it up and make it more tightly fitting so you can act. In other words, “gird up your loins.”

Says Jesus, “Be like servants with girded loins and a lamp lit.” But this is no surprise: it sounds as if God’s gift has strings attached to it...a present with conditions...a bequest that has small print requirements. And we know those all too well. You get the kingdom, but then there is the small print...sort of like all that mail, phone calls, and emails that say, “You have won the big prize.” I don’t know about you but I have won millions of dollars, countless trips to Las Vegas, Cancun, Disney World, and other exotic places, new cars, and the list goes on. My secret number has been chosen out of millions of possibilities, even though I did not know I had a secret number. But then you read the small print.

It is the Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom but it seems you have to be dressed for action and have a light lit. You have to be sitting on alert at all times. It does not sound like such a gift. A certain member of my extended family, who will go nameless, is known for giving monetary gifts as presents. But the check comes with note attached that says, “And if you want to make me happy, you will use it to buy XYZ.” And, often it is something that you did not particularly want! Do you sense the strings attached to the gift?

Gird up your loins...light a lamp. You got do something you got to do in order to receive this gift, to deserve it, to earn the gift. Except...surprise! As Jesus continues with this parable about servants who are awaiting the return of the master, it turns out that is not about condition, strings, or requirements. That’s what we might expect...and Jesus even says something similar in other place: The master has gone away...the servants need to stay awake and alert...you do not know when the master is going to come back. Be ready...be watchful...be alert, so you don’t get in trouble, so you want get punished. That’s the message we hear in the church each Advent: be alert, awake, ready, so you don’t get caught being unfaithful.

But listen again to Jesus’ conclusion here: “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. If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves.”

Did you hear the blessing? The role reversal here? It is not that servants will serve the master when the master comes home...it is that the master will serve them. This is not same parable of waiting we hear at Advent. So, for example, let’s say you get a phone call from George W. Bush: he’s coming to your house to see how regular Americans live. Given his schedule, he may be delayed, but you are asked to be ready. Whether you are Republican, Democrat, or independent, my hunch is that you honor the office. Would you have lights on? Would you straighten up a bit? Would you stock the refrigerator with some snacks and beverages? Would you be wearing your Saturday afternoon grubby clothes or just stay in your pajamas? Or would you dress up a bit? And then for the president to arrive and ask you to sit down and begin to serve you...to take care of your household chores...to tend you. Wouldn’t happen! It wouldn’t happen! But that is exactly what Jesus says happens here. The master serves the servants.

Not only does the God give the kingdom...not only does God get a holy kick out of giving...what a

blessing for those who are ready to serve: God serves them! Here's the deal: As long as we look at our service to God as a transaction where I will do something for God in order that God will do something for me, we are going to be disappointed. How often we get into this mode: God, I will forgive if...God, I will be generous, so now you need to.... Or the most common complaint: God, I did the right things, certainly better than a lot of people I know, so why you aren't cutting me a little slack, giving me an extra bit of blessing?

Here is where Jesus surprises us: We do not gird up our loins and light lamps because we have to do to get what God will give. It is God's good pleasure to give to us. We gird up our loins and light our lamps in order that we will not miss what God has to offer.

Think again about the shoulds and oughts of our faith. Why did our youth go to Washington, DC, on a mission trip? Why do you attend Sunday School? Why do you agree to serve a Kinder Kirk for our preschool age? Why do you wrestle with generosity and the finances of the church? Why do we read our Bibles? Why do we take Disciple classes? Not because God requires it of us, rather because we will be more prepared to receive what God has to offer.

In a sort of round-about way, this week's newspaper reminded me of what it means to be prepared to receive. This week's newspaper told again of the tragic death of Ned Marshall in a convenience store robbery. Ned's father, Mr. Ed Marshall, was a great saint of this church, who is now in the Church Triumphant. Ed Marshall used to run a fuel oil business here in Rock Hill back before the days of natural gas and efficient electric heat—fuel oil was vital in the winter. His company's trucks would go throughout Rock Hill during the winter months, filling tanks. As I understand it through family stories, the Pender household kept running out of oil and having to make an emergency call for more fuel oil. And so my mother would call and say, "Please, Mr. Marshall, come fill up our tank. We have small children. We need heat." And with each emergency call, Mr. Ed Marshall would patiently say to my mother: "Mrs. Pender, you need to get a bigger tank." But no, we kept scraping by, with that fifty gallon tank...and we went from emergency to emergency call.

You need a bigger tank. Gird up your loins; light a lamp. Act on the service that you know you are called to do. Not because you have to...not because it is going to win you ticket into heaven...but because you will be more prepared to receive what God has to offer. You simply are getting a bigger tank.

God's visitation will come...not on our schedule but on His. How joyful will be the servants who are ready...they will be served by the master. Gird up your loins...be dressed for action. Get a bigger tank.