

Sermon for August 11, 2019 on Luke 12: 32-40

Today's Gospel is a continuation of the lessons that we have been hearing since Ascension about what it means to follow Jesus.

This particular text from Luke contains a lot of instruction – it's a lot to unpack - and, like any of the sayings of Jesus it can be interpreted on many different levels.

Basically, though, it seems to contain four instructions: 1.) Do not be afraid. 2.) Sell your possessions and give alms. 3.) Make an unfailing treasure in heaven. And 4.) Be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

We can understand a little more about these instructions on how to follow Jesus if we look at them in light of the audiences for which they were intended. First of all, obviously, the audience to which Jesus is speaking in this moment, in this story, is the first intended audience. Secondly, the author of the Gospel of Luke was writing for an audience of followers in the early church when he wrote the books of Luke and Acts, probably between 50 and 80 years after the crucifixion and thirdly, mystically, as always, we are also the audience to which Jesus is speaking.

The first instruction Jesus gives about following him is “Do not be afraid, little flock.” The setting in which Jesus makes this speech is to an audience of thousands of people. As he's been traveling around and preaching, more and more people have heard about him and at the beginning of this chapter it says the crowds on this day are so huge that they “trampled on one

another.” So, it was a very tense situation – people were almost frantic, trying to get to Jesus and to hear him, and the danger surrounding him had increased because he had been having a series of confrontations with various religious and political authorities. “Do not be afraid” seems like a fairly impossible instruction, given the circumstances.

If we look at the author of Luke, writing several decades after Jesus’ crucifixion, the fear has intensified. Early followers of Jesus have been tortured and executed. The Roman Empire is determined to completely obliterate this new religious movement. Christians are starting to lose hope because they’re realizing Jesus hasn’t returned yet, and that he may not return to save them all within their lifetimes, as they believed he had promised to do.

And of course these words ring true in our ears today, as we live in an era of tremendous fear. We hear things on the news that ramp up our anxiety. We struggle to maintain a roof over our heads, and food on our table, as the world seems to be falling into negativity and disorder. But Jesus says to these people, and to us, “do not be afraid.” He tells us to focus on the bigger picture – to focus on God.

His next instructions are to “sell your possessions and give alms to the poor” and to “make purses for yourselves that do not wear out.” These instructions seem even more difficult than the admonition to be not afraid. In the setting of this story, Jesus was probably speaking to an audience of poor people. Most people in ancient society were desperately poor, and Jesus most likely wasn’t talking to this crowd of thousands in some rich person’s home, or in an official setting for the ruling class. He was probably outside, where common people could gather and

hear him, and he's telling them to look beyond the very little they have, to share what they have and contribute to the greater good.

The author of Luke, speaking to the early church, was also speaking to the poor and disenfranchised. Early Christians were forced to dwell on the fringes of society, unable to fully participate in the economy and become prosperous citizens because their religion was illegal. They eked out whatever living they could, and they were all instructed by scripture to give all they could to the community purse.

In speaking to us today, Jesus says we can focus on the loving abundance of God instead of a model of scarcity in which we feel we have to heap up riches in order to protect ourselves against impoverishment. He is telling us that if we have faith, God will provide. God will protect us and give us the safety and security that we seek, if only we will trust him.

And finally, Jesus tells this fearful crowd of poor people – to be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

In this text, Jesus is standing among a crowd of thousands, in a world where most people do not realize that he is the incarnation of God himself. He has come into the world at an unexpected hour, in the form of a lowly and poor Jew, and only a tiny percentage of the people he encountered realized who he actually was.

The author of this Gospel, speaking to the early church, was trying to reassure the followers of Jesus that he was going to return, even if the prospect of him returning in their lifetime was fading away, and that their faith for which believers were suffering martyrdom and persecution, was not in vain.

And what does this instruction about being ready for the coming of the Son of Man mean to us, today? Countless theologians have debated about what Jesus actually meant when he said he would return. Did he mean he would return after he was crucified, which he did indeed do? Did he mean he would return at some point in history to banish evil and rule the world? Did he mean he would return at the end of this world, to raise the dead and usher the living into the next world? The only thing we know for sure – is that we do not know. Jesus often told people things that were simply beyond their understanding, and this is one of them. As he says here in this Gospel – the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

What, then, can we do to be ready? I think that since we are not capable of understanding the concept of what some refer to as the Second Coming of Jesus, we can make ourselves ready to encounter Jesus every day, in our busy lives. We can engage in a practice building awareness of God's presence. We can stop to thank God, to praise God, to talk to God, and to establish a pattern of connection throughout the day, just like the pattern we have established with all our loved ones. God is always with us, and when we allow ourselves to encounter and connect with him always, rather than just on Sundays, or in our structured prayer times, we can form a deeper bond of love and trust with him.

The first part of this Gospel story contains one of the most beautiful phrases in scripture: “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” If we truly treasure our loving God, then that is where our energy, and our focus, and our heart will always be – far above the cares and concerns and fears of the present age.