

WHAT LIES AHEAD?

A Sermon for the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, August 8, 2010

Text: Luke 12:32-40

Good grief! How can I preach this? Like, I'm not going to preach what I wouldn't do myself; and I'm not about to sell my . . . violin to "give alms."

"Sell your possessions and give alms"? What was he thinking! This is just what he told that rich guy: "Go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and come, follow me." He didn't.

I mean, really! "Sell your possessions and give alms."

Shall I water it down? Like, "Have a garage sale of things you don't really want anyway, and give a tenth of the proceeds to charity." A little lame, compared to Jesus' words, but maybe I could make a trip to Half Price Books with a nonessential part of my library. Of course, it's not like Jesus to make suggestions. He said "Go, and sin no more," not "Go, and try to stay out of trouble."

There are other difficult bits in this passage: "You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour." "Code red! Jesus is coming!"? You know how it is: "If it's *always* code red it's never code red." People have been waiting for nearly two thousand years. So, shall I tell people to sit on the edge of their seats? Or shall we skip this?

Maybe I should just preach next Sunday's Gospel. . . .

Well, that's no improvement. Jesus asks "Do you think that I have come to bring peace on earth?" And then he says "No, I tell you, but rather division!" *That* won't preach in Peoria.

Since we'll be reading from Luke for a few more months, let's see what else we have to look forward to.

All right! On August 15 he does something popular. Unexceptionable. He heals—on the Sabbath—a woman who has been crippled for eighteen years. Who can criticize him for that? The crowd that "was rejoicing at all the wonderful things he was doing."

Except, of course, how do you *preach* that? Do I tell everyone they should be like Jesus and miraculously heal people? If only Jesus had done a few less amazing things, which could better serve as examples for ordinary people like us. Like washing the dishes or feeding the pets without being told.

Let's keep looking. The following Sunday Jesus criticizes people for grabbing the best places at a dinner. I could preach that! "Don't be putting yourself forward!" Except that he goes and ruins it by exaggerating! He says that when we give a feast, we should not invite our "friends or brothers or relatives or neighbors, in case they might invite [us] back"!

Like, really! When we give a banquet we're going to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, etc.?

Come on, Jesus! Give us something to work with.

Oh, boy. Labor Day is another difficult passage. Jesus says: "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple."

The next Sunday (if we're still bothering to attend church!) we will hear from Luke 15. There is *more* joy in heaven over some clod who repents, than there is over us, who are managing all right? How unfair is that! So I suppose in heaven's Olympics they play the national anthem of the guy who comes in last? Those are not motivational words! Why are we supposed to grow in righteousness, if Jesus is so dismissive about good results?

September 19, we might want to leave the children at home so they don't hear the story in which Jesus *praises* a man who defrauds his employer. When he learns he is to be fired, he fiddles the books to make friends with some of the creditors! But that is also where Jesus says we "cannot serve God and wealth." *That* we totally get! [sarcastically] Right!

Next in this parade of difficult passages comes the dispiriting story of the rich man and Lazarus. The "hero" of the story is one of those sad people who make us feel guilty about how much we have.

Not to mention that Jesus also alludes to the torments of hell. Skip that, for sure!

And we're not even to October yet!

Next, Jesus tells us that when we have done all that we were ordered to do, we are supposed to say "We are worthless slaves! We have done only what we ought to have done!" Who is Jesus calling worthless? . . .

I don't think the story about the healing of ten lepers will bother anyone. Except that Jesus had to make a big deal of the irony of the fact that the hero was a Samaritan. Which it would have been nice if he would stop rubbing in all the time!

The Sunday after that, Jesus says God is more helpful than an unjust judge who doesn't care. I should hope so!

Following that comes another story, about two fellows praying in the temple, in which Jesus makes the good guy look bad and the bad guy look good. Then Zacchaeus gets the limelight. That's ironic. His high school class voted him least likely to do the right thing.

Then Jesus goes all “Blessed are the poor, the hungry, those who weep, and on and on.” Sob, sob, is that the Christian life?

But things get really strange when we get to mid-November. Jesus tries to scare us with earthquakes and famines and plagues. He says, “You will be hated by all because of my name.” And *that’s* the day we’re going to welcome new members? Ouch.

Finally, the church year closes—on Christ the King Sunday—with Jesus on the cross saying to a *thief* “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” Me, when I get in trouble I sound a lot more like the other guy, saying “Hey, help yourself and us!”

I hope you know I’m kidding. I’m not dreading this. I’m actually excited about preaching from those difficult texts. There isn’t a boring one in the lot. And I know that what I am actually called to preach to you is first and foremost and finally *not* what you must do, but what God has done. The actor who has done something that is good news or Gospel is not you or me, it is God.

Jesus says, right at the beginning of today’s Gospel, “It is the Father’s good pleasure to *give you the kingdom.*” Not, “It is the Father’s good pleasure to give you hell,” but “It is the Father’s good pleasure to *give you the kingdom.*” . . . “To *give you the kingdom.*” That is God’s will, according to Jesus Christ.

Then why did he say upsetting things like, for example, “sell your possessions and give alms”? Not as a requirement to satisfy in order to purchase the kingdom from God. Rather, to show us how totally different the kingdom of God is from the one we construct.

We think we are richer the more we get. And so we are, on the terms of this world. But on the terms of the Spirit of God, which matter far more, it is the opposite. It is the giving away that accrues to our account. This is the kingdom the Father wants to give to us, one in which we are rich and getting richer, by God’s good grace, as we give, as we love, as we serve one another.

For us, the icon of all such giving is the cross of Jesus Christ, who gave himself utterly for us, to give us the kingdom the Father had given to him. We don’t have to repeat his sacrifice. And to obey his command we don’t have to wait until we are multi-billionaires, then give away half of our unimaginable wealth.

What we need to do is “not be afraid.” Trust that the will of the God who made us is not for us to be ruined, but for us to have everything good.

Gospel readings are not the only difficult passages. There are in our lives difficult passages that make us afraid, times when it seems that the universe and God and fate and the stars are all lined up against us. We do not know what lies ahead, so we are afraid.

A Sermon by Rev. Marcus Felde, Ph.D., pastor of Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Indianapolis, Indiana

Do not fear, Jesus says to us, it is the Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Trust that word for Jesus' sake. Amen.

