

The 10th Sunday after Pentecost (C)
Lectionary 19/Proper 14
August 8, 2010
Text: Luke 12:32-40

Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

Of course, we do feel afraid. Anxiety and fear seem to be the defining characteristics of our time. Everywhere we look, there are threats. There's war and terrorism, there's unemployment and economic instability, health problems, environmental danger. Fear, worry and anxiety are the natural fruit of such times.

Jesus wants to set us free from the grip of worry and fear, because fear and worry consume our attention and press down on us like a heavy weight. They make our lives small, so that we hold on tightly to everything we think is ours: our life, our things, our money. Fear and worry limit our vision and imagination, making it difficult for us to see beyond ourselves.

What could possibly set us free from such a confined and constrained life, held captive by fear and worry? Sometimes I fantasize that there's some level of material security able to eliminate worry and fear. But there isn't. There is only one thing that can set us free to live with the great, wide-open, generous-hearted freedom that God intends for us. We need nothing less than the intervention of God. And that, Jesus says, is precisely what God does for us. It is the Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

This isn't just a promise of going to heaven when you die. Jesus means that here and now, you have been made part of the reign of God. Your life has been incorporated into the great, grand work of God to restore and renew and heal all of creation. God has decided. Little flock—God is pleased to grow the kingdom in and among you. God gives you the life you were created to have—a life of joy in the presence of God, a life of being God's person in the world, living a life full of purpose, being surrounded by love... It's all a gift from God. You don't have to show God how serious you can be, how good and religious and dedicated you can be. You don't have to earn God's favor. This life with God that you seek, this life that you need, is a gift. God has decided to give you the kingdom. It's a gift that begins now, and will find its fulfillment in the life to come. Have no fear, little flock. God has decided. It's not up to you. It depends entirely on God's goodness and generosity.

This might be a good time to pause and ask Jesus—Is this for real? It sounds all well and fine for life long ago. Life was simpler back then. But what about now? Isn't that just looking at life through rose-colored glasses? What about all the things Jesus didn't have to deal with, like unemployment or terrorism? But before we accuse Jesus of being a Pollyanna, we ought to look at what life

was really like in 1st century Palestine. It was no picnic. The tax system was a tool of the powerful to suck off everything above a near-starvation level of subsistence for the average person. Terror was normal policy for the Roman occupation army. Increasing debt was forcing more and more people off their land and into a downward cycle of poverty. Suffering, disease, and death were everywhere.

Jesus is *not* telling us, “Don’t worry because everything will be OK.” Everything may or may not be OK—but worry and fear won’t make it any better. Jesus wants to give us that true sense of perspective that will help us stay centered in the storm, that will give our hearts courage when everything around us is unsettled. Jesus does so by reminding us that everything in this life is temporary—not just our stuff, but the people who are precious to us, our health, even our own life. All these are temporary, and none of them can give us an unshakeable sense of security. When we give them primary place in our heart, they will disappoint us. If we treat them as our life’s true treasure, they will become a sort of curse.

God would give us a treasure that is not temporary, a purse that does not wear out. God would give us the life our hearts desire, and which nothing on this earth can give. Have no fear little flock. It is the Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom—a life with God that holds true through good times and bad, when the sun is shining and when the stormy winds blow. This life with God is our deepest treasure, and it begins now and is brought to fulfillment in the life to come.

God has already made you part of God’s great work to heal and renew and restore all of creation. God has given your life true purpose—God has claimed you to be part of God’s work for peace and life and blessing. And God holds your life in a powerful embrace of love that is stronger than sin, stronger than human weakness and failure, stronger than judgment, grief or loss, stronger than death. There is nothing in all of creation able to separate us from the love of God. All of the temporary things that have been placed in our care—our time, our abilities, our possessions—can be used to serve God’s purposes, to be instruments of God’s love, to serve the kingdom of God. And when we see them this way, they can be a source of blessing, not only in our lives, but for others as well.

We still do experience worry and fear. We may be afraid of losing something important to us. But listen to the promise of our great and loving God. God our Father is well pleased to give you the kingdom. We may be afraid of changes that life may bring. But listen to the promise of God. God has decided to give the kingdom to you. We may be afraid this life will come to an end, that we will experience disappointment and suffering. Yes, this life is a temporary gift. We must, in the end, surrender it. There will be loss and pain. But through it all, you are God’s beloved child, and God has chosen you for the kingdom of God.

So then, is there anything we should be afraid of? Jesus does warn us that we can't receive this life from God while we are chasing after another life. He warns us that we can't serve God and wealth. Perhaps, then, we should be afraid of living our days so caught up with things that have no great and lasting value that we miss out on the gift God would give. Maybe we should be afraid of investing our life's treasure in working our fingers to the bone, or zoning out in front of the TV, so that the years zip by, leaving our hearts untouched by the power of God's love. Perhaps we should be afraid of being so concerned about what other people think that we never recognize the essential purpose of our being—to love God with our whole heart and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

+ + +

Have no fear, little flock. It is God your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. God has decided to give you the one treasure that is worth seeking, the one gift that is worth giving your heart to, the one life that is worth living. Have no fear, little flock. God has decided! Amen