

Season After Pentecost [Proper 14] - Year C

August 10/11, 2013

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: Genesis 15: 1-6]; Psalm 33: 12-22; Luke 12: 32-40

Did you ever walk into a parable? I did just this week. It wasn't one we'd find in the gospels but I could swear I heard Jesus speaking.

There once were two men. Both were in prison. They both attend worship regularly. George came up to me as soon as I walked in. He had a huge smile on his face. "Pastor Alessandri! I didn't know you were coming tonight. I just mailed you a note." "Really?" "Yeah! You should get it next week. I'm back on track." "What track is that?" "Tithing. I let it slide after one time and God has laid in on my heart to try again. So I've sent you a check. Use it wherever you think it's needed." "Well, I would donate to your church, the Community of St. Dysmas unless there's another place you would like it to go?" "I trust you to give it to a good place." "Thank you for that trust. If ever there's a specific charity you'd like to help, just let me know." He was gleaming. "It feels good to give, doesn't it." "Yeah!" he said with a deep, happy sigh. Later in the evening George said, "You know I did see something on 60 Minutes last Sunday that was a really amazing ministry." He eventually remember the name of the ship was Africa Mercy. It sailed on the west coast of Africa, stopping to provide life-changing surgeries and medical assistance. "It's a Christian charity, too." he said, "All the staff pay to serve on the ship. I had to duck my head and take a breath while I was watching. I couldn't let anyone see me cry. But it really moved me." "I'll look it up and send it there." He beamed.

As I was leaving Frank said, "Can I talk with you. I have so much hatred inside I could explode. I don't know what to do." He told me he had found out his mother had been moved to a nursing home and the guardian over his property had rented out his two houses. "That's not what I wanted for my Mom. But what really has me angry is I'm afraid there's going to be nothing when I get out." He began to describe how well off he had been. He was a master plumber. He had two houses and a new truck. He had expensive fixtures in his sinks. He kept naming all these

things that he had bought and their cost. I could tell I was suppose to be impressed. “If I get out and find it’s all gone, I’m going to hurt some one.” This usually gentle giant, was anxious to the nth degree. Worried about his stuff. Angry he was in prison and not able to protect his things. He was utterly distraught and nothing I said or prayed could touch it. “What would you feel like pastor, if all your stuff was gone and you had nothing?” Now that pinched a bit.

So there’s my parable. One man went off to his prison bed, marveling at God’s generosity and wondering how it could feel so good giving away a tenth of his very limited income. Another man went to sleep making lists of his possessions and how much each costed, as if that was the sum of his own worth. He was gripped by a fear we can all understand — losing everything in a fire, tornado or poor choices. And that fear had spun into pure panic that left no room for hope, peace or even God. To them both Jesus said,

“Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give the kingdom to you. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out... where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

One translation for the Greek word for anxiety is “of two minds.” Being anxious tends to distract us, to draw us into two or more directions, making us more distracted and more anxious. Charles Spurgeon said, “Our anxiety does not empty tomorrow of its sorrow, but only empties today of its strength.”¹ To our anxiety and fear, our Lord says, “Do not be afraid.” Do not be afraid Abraham, I WILL fulfill my promise and you will have a son and descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky.” Do not be afraid Mary, for you have found favor with God.” Bethlehem shepherds, “Do not be afraid; for see — I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.” Simon Peter, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.” When we hear, “Do not be afraid” in Scripture it is God’s promise and it usually signals something big, something to which we should pay attention. The lessons for this week take our very real feelings of fear and turn them on their heads with the good news of God’s promises, Jesus’ love and

grace, and the power of faith to free us from the fears that would bind us..No matter how fragile our faith and fierce our fear, we have freedom in Christ. ² We are not defined by our successes or failures, our possessions or losses. We are not abandoned by God in folly or crisis.

“Have no fear, little flock. Its your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” Our Father delights in giving what is good and life-giving. Our Father finds great pleasure in giving to us what no thief can steal or time destroy. If we will but believe it ---- live into that grace of God, we will find another way of dealing with our fears, losses and stress about tomorrow. It’s the way of faith. Learning, like Abraham, that God can be trusted to be present and keep promises. “God can be trusted to give peace in the midst of the storm. God can be trusted to take what is evil and out of it bring something life-giving. God can be trusted to empower you in the midst of trouble. God can be trusted to receive you when you die. God can be trusted!”³ Its that trust in God’s goodness and promises, no matter the circumstances, that allows George to find great delight in giving from behind prison walls, from very limited resources It’s that same faith in God’s goodness that has the power to free Frank from the fear of the future and the darkness that has invaded his heart and imagination.

The late spiritual writer Henri Nouwen received a great revelation about faith at, of all places, the circus! Nouwen went to see the German trapeze group "The Flying Rodleighs" perform. He was mesmerized by their breath-taking performance as they flew gracefully through the air. At the end of the show, he spoke with the leader of the troupe, Rodleigh himself. Nouwen asked him how he was able to perform with such grace and ease so high in the air. Rodleigh responded, "The public might think that I am the great star of the trapeze, but the real star is Joe, my catcher...The secret is that the flyer does nothing and the catcher does everything. When I fly to Joe, I have simply to stretch out my arms and hands and wait for him to catch me. The worst thing the flyer can do is try to catch the catcher. I'm not supposed to catch Joe. It's Joe's task to catch me"⁴

“Have no fear, little flock” God is there to catch you. No matter how deep you’re in, God

is even deeper. No matter how far it feels you are falling, you'll land in the love and mercy of God. Have no fear, little flock. It's God's pleasure, it's God's delight to give you the peace that passes all understanding, that can bring joy back into your dark or sorrowing heart.

There once were two men. Both were in prison. Both came to worship each week. One was imprisoned by the state but freed by the treasure of knowing Jesus. The was also imprisoned by the state but also by the fear and bitterness that invaded his heart and every waking hour, for the treasure to which he was giving his heart was the stuff of a former life. I think there's a bit of George and Frank in each of us.... battling about what treasure we will give our heart to. It's a parable about freedom or prison that has nothing to do with a state penitentiary. Let Jesus's words be louder than either the George or Frank in our heads — “Have no fear, little flock. It's your Father's delight to give you the kingdom.” God will catch you. Amen. Linda

M Alessandri 8/9/13

ENDNOTES

1. Ida Hakkarinen, Sermon for August 8, 2010 (Lectionary 19, 11th Sunday after Pentecost) preached at Hoe Evangelical Lutheran Church and Student Center, College Park, MD) p. 2
2. Sharron R. Blezard, “From Fear to Faith to Freedom” post August 11, 2013 on <http://www.stewardshipoflife.org/2013/08/from-fear-to-faith-to-freedom/>
3. Rev. Dr. Charles Reeb,, “When Trouble Comes” August 8, 2010 as posted on www.day1.org
4. Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Only Necessary Thing: Living a Prayerful Life* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999), pp.195-196