

Dressed for Action

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church
a new church for a new day, in Fremont, California,
on Sunday, August 11, 2013, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer
Scripture: Luke 12:32-40 and Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16
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Jesus and I had an argument this past week. I really didn't want to preach about money. I wanted to look at our readings for today and feel the blessings of the cloud of witnesses, the communion of saints. I wanted to look at our readings for today and think about how we dress for action in a spiritual way. But, darn it, Jesus keeps bringing up money.

"Sell your possessions, and give alms.... Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

The context for these words is, I think, important. Earlier in the chapter, someone in the crowd tells Jesus to tell this person's brother to divide the family inheritance with this person. I think we can assume this is a younger brother. The older brother has possession of their father's estate and is not sharing it. Maybe the younger brother, recognizing Jesus' propensity to take the side of the oppressed and dispossessed, figured Jesus would be an ally in the quest for a share of the estate.

But Jesus isn't sucked in. "Take care!" he says. "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." And after telling a parable about the folly of focusing life on the accumulation of wealth and stuff, Jesus tells the crowd not to worry.

We're more familiar with these lines as part of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel, but here they are in Luke's, too. God cares about the ravens and the lilies of the field and even the grass in the meadow, Jesus tells us. Certainly God cares about *your* welfare. "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your father's good pleasure to give you the kin-dom."

These are reassuring words ... until we get to what we're supposed to do: sell your possessions and give alms.

"Are you serious, Jesus?" I asked this week.

"Yes," he said, "I couldn't be more serious." Of all the things Jesus is serious about, the coming of God's domination-free order is at the top of the list.

We live in a domination-based societal order and world order. And central to all domination is economic inequality and ranking. Jesus is serious about us being possession-free, about the whole world becoming possession-free because that is what will lead to God's domination-free order.

But, I'll be honest: nothing sends terror through my gut quiet like his injunction, "Sell your possessions." I don't know about you, but I equivocate. I rationalize. I explain. And then I start heaping on the guilt.

Yet, I believe that Jesus is not trying to make us feel bad. He is reminding us that it is all divine gift, not effort on our part: “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kin-dom.”

The early Christians and others right up to the present have tried living this way – possession-free. The only contemporary ones who seem to be at all successful, at least from my vantage point, are the monastics. Whether it's the nuns and monks in orders that are centuries old or more contemporary expressions of monasticism,¹ the thing that they have in common is supportive community. The only way that I can conceive of a possession-free life working is when the community holds the possessions, rather than the individual.

And perhaps that's what Jesus is calling us to: to build a community that truly cares for each other, a common-wealth. When I think about what it takes to do this, what it takes to move into a life that is possession-free, I am baffled. Perhaps Abraham is a model.

To God's invitation to believe, Abraham simply said, “Yes.” Ignorant as to why God chose him and without proof that God would fulfill the promise of descendants, Abraham said, “Yes.” In a moment – held sacred by Jews, Christians, and Muslims – Abraham was overcome with faith and embarked on a journey. What stark contrast to being overcome with fear. Perhaps when Jesus is telling us not to worry, not to be afraid, he is telling us to have faith.

The next paragraph seems a bit like a non sequitur, at least at first. Jesus goes from telling us not to worry, to selling our possessions and giving alms, to reminding us that if we want to know where our heart really is, just look at where our treasure is – to telling us to be awake, to be ready. When we hear this sort of language, especially when it's connected to the metaphor of the wedding banquet, we expect to hear something about the “second coming.” We expect the usual apocalyptic advice to stay awake and be ready, because when the Son of God returns, he'll be taking names and kicking butt. But, wow, Jesus does not go where I'm expecting him to go.

“Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; 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.” So far, this is language we are used to hearing about the “return of the Son of Man.” Just as the slaves don't know when the master will return from a wedding banquet – it might well be in the middle of the night – we don't know when Jesus is going to return. So we slaves need to be dressed for action, ready for Jesus' return. Because when Jesus does return, there'll be work to do, right?

Except that's not what happens. The master returns and he makes the servants recline, as at a formal banquet, girds *himself*, and *serves them* a meal. “In that time, men wore long, loose, flowing garments. In order to work, they had to gird their robes about their waists to permit freedom of movement.”² So imagine being someone listening to Jesus. Whatever your class, you would have understood the image: Servants and slaves waiting on the return of their master. You would

have imagined them, with their robes cinched up around their waist, ready to spring into action when their master called. You would have imagined them waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet at who know what hour, keeping their lamps filled with oil and burning, so that they can see well enough to respond instantly should their master return in the middle of the night. Only by living in such readiness will they be prepared to welcome him properly when he comes home and knocks at the door.

And when he does return, he tells them – his attentive slaves – to recline at the table. And he cinches up *his* robes and *serves them*. No master acts like this. So, when the Son of God returns ...

Except, Jesus doesn't say anything about some future apocalypse. Jesus is talking about where we have our faith here and now. "Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven."

Be dressed for action today. Be ready at any moment to receive blessing, to receive grace, to be welcomed to the table. Jesus is overturning the whole edifice of social stratification and ranking.

St. Augustine's life did not begin in a very saintly manner. As one writer put it, he gave "himself over to whatever pleasures presented themselves."³ His mother prayed for him, at least as the legend goes, that he would give his life to the service of Christ, but Augustine persisted in his more carnal passions. That is, until one day when he sat with a friend on a bench weeping over the state of his life. It was at this moment that he heard a child – a boy or a girl, he says he does not know which it was – singing a song. The sound was coming from a neighboring house. The child was chanting over and over: "Pick it up, read it; pick it up; read it." This is a translation of how Augustine described what happened next:

"Immediately I ceased weeping and began most earnestly to think whether it was usual for children in some kind of game to sing such a song, but I could not remember ever having heard the like. So, damming the torrent of my tears, I got to my feet, for I could not but think that this was a divine command to open the Bible and read the first passage I should light upon.

"So I quickly returned to the bench where Alypius was sitting, for their [sic] I had put down the apostles [sic] book. I snatched it up, opened it, and in silence read the paragraph on which my eyes first fell: 'Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh to fulfill the lust thereof.' I wanted to read no further, nor did I need to. For instantly, as the sentence ended, there was infused in my heart something like the light of full certainty and all the gloom of doubt vanished away."⁴

Now, there are some preachers who will point to this conversion as an object lesson about being ready for the Second Coming. "Had Christ returned before that fateful day, Augustine would have been caught unprepared."⁵ But I can't help but wonder if, for Augustine, this was the moment of Christ's return.

Perhaps it is when we let go of our own desires, when we let go of our own fears, when we let go of our agendas and possessions, that Christ returns in our lives.

There is a through line in our passage from Luke. It moves from fear to treasure to being prepared. I can't help but wonder if this is what a life of faith might actually look like – or at least that it is one way of understanding what a life of faith looks like. If we start with treasure, we are likely to put our hope in achievements, acquisitions, and assets. But if we start with faith, if that absence “of fear precedes our fear-driven desire for possessions, purchases, and procurements, we might actually be able to imagine treasures beyond self-driven determination, self-assessed success, and self-obsessed security.”⁶ And then we can make ourselves ready to receive God's blessings and to respond.

Jesus is calling us to be dressed for the action of Jesus' own activity in the world. And that action is likely to come when we least expect it or imagine seeing it. “In other words, waiting around, waiting for instructions, is not going to cut it. Letting go of fear, letting go of treasure, and being prepared is the pattern for discipleship. Being without fear, knowing the source of your treasure – that is, your identity, your worth – makes it possible to be prepared for and an actual participant in God's [Commonwealth].”⁷

And I think that's what it means to be dressed for action.

Amen.

ENDNOTES

¹ See, for instance, “New Monasticism,” *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Monasticism and Rob Moll, “The New Monasticism,” *Christianity Today*, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/september/16.38.html>.

² Alyce M. McKenzie, “Mise en Place,” *Patheos*, <http://www.patheos.com/Progressive-Christian/Mise-en-Place-Alyce-McKenzie-08-02-2013.html> (10 August 2013).

³ Brett Blair, “Do Not Let Him Find You Found Sleeping,” in an email dated 6 August 2013 from sermons.com.

⁴ *Ibid*, quoting Augustine's *Confessions*.

⁵ This is, in fact, what Brett Blair said. *Ibid*.

⁶ Karoline Lewis, “Commentary on Luke 12:32-40,” *workingpreacher.org*, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1805 (10 August 2013).

⁷ *Ibid*.

ADDITIONAL SOURCES USED:

Michaela Bruzzes, “Extraordinary Faith,” *Sojourners*, <http://sojo.net/preaching-the-word/extraordinary-faith?parent=41233> (10 August 2013).

Walter Wink, “The Serving Master,” *Sojourners*, <http://sojo.net/preaching-the-word/serving-master?parent=41233> (10 August 2013).