

"Antidote to Fear"

"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

After putting it off on numerous occasion, I finally accepted Group Services' invitation to a "Pre-Retirement Workshop," admitted that I'm closer to the end of my years of ordained ministry than I am to the beginning. The workshop took place at the start of the Eastern Synod Assembly in June, and was actually very informative in helping Susan and me understand how our church's pension plan works and what a future retirement might hold for us. In my case, it will be a bit more complicated since I've served congregations in two countries and will receive payments from two separate pension plans; but even though retirement is still a long ways off for me, it is comforting to know that there are funds waiting for the day when I make the transition from full-time ministry to another stage in life.

While I am no financial expert, I do spend a good deal of time dealing with our finances, including paying bills and making certain that all of our accounts are up-to-date. While we have been blessed through our married life with stable housing and income, I must admit that there have been times when I have become anxious about our financial situation. I have worried over whether we would have enough income to cover our expenses, or if we are saving enough for a "rainy day" or for retirement. I have been concerned about unforeseen expenses that might deplete our savings or place us deep into debt. When I accepted the call to Zion, I spent a lot of time worrying about whether we could afford buying a house, or if a bank would give us a mortgage, or what how our financial health would be affected by moving back to Canada. I may look cool and calm on the surface, but underneath I'm often a boiling caldron of anxiety!

So I must admit to having mixed feelings over Jesus' encouragement for us to "*not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.*" (Luke 12:32). Jesus words are, of course, not some out-of-the-blue optimistic statement or a pie-in-the-sky platitude (like the old song "Don't Worry, Be Happy"), but are grounded in his earlier teachings on the faithfulness of God. In words that are also found in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, Jesus points to creation for signs of God's continuing presence and provision for the world over which God is still Lord:

- "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest?... Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well." – Luke 12:22-26, 31.

Jesus refers to his followers as a "little flock," a phrase used by Paul in his address to the elders at Miletus ("Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers ... " – Acts 20:28) as well as in addressing elders in the First Letter of Peter ("Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock." – 1 Peter 5:3); it is a reminder that the Lord who gathered his disciples has identified himself as the "Good Shepherd," the one who "*lays down his life for his sheep ... so there will be one flock, one shepherd.*" (John 10:11, 16). It is for this flock that has lovingly been gathered and protected by the Good Shepherd that it is "*your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom,*" a phrase used in Luke's Gospel to express important aspects of God's sovereign will and purposes:

- "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" – 2:14.
- "And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'" – 3:22.

- “At that same hour Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, ‘I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for so it was well-pleasing in your sight.’” – 10:21.

For those gathered together as “[God’s] people, and the sheep of his pasture” (Psalm 100:3), Jesus offers what might be called an “antidote to fear,” one that centers on our relationship with our possessions: “*Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys.*” (10:33). Instead of a life controlled by anxiety over one’s possessions, Jesus suggests that freedom from such fear comes in a life devoted to providing for the needs of others. Presented with a choice of whether we are to grasp or to give, the alternative to anxiety over what we do not possess or control is to release our grasp of that which we do not control, that “*which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven*” (10:28). We can lay up treasure on earth or in heaven – but not both. Therefore, Jesus exhorts his disciples to sell their possessions and give alms (“*So give for alms those things that are within; and see, everything will be clean for you.*” – 11:41). Almsgiving was, along with prayer and fasting, the foundation of Jewish piety, and the Christian community continued this responsibility toward the needy, sometimes in acts of radical selflessness (“*All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.*” – Acts 2:45). Concern for the poor was a priority and totally consistent with the value system in which the disciples of Jesus lived: “*They only asked one thing, that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do.*” (Galatians 2:10).

In his instructions to his disciples, Jesus had earlier commanded them to “*take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money – not even an extra tunic.*” (9:3); how he points them to purses that will not wear out and treasure that will not fail. Jesus is pointing his disciples to the true treasures of which they are heirs:

- “By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.” – 1 Peter 1:3-5.

The true treasure for Jesus’ followers is this “*unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys.*” The way in which we handle material goods, therefore, reveals where our true commitments lie – whether we have earthly treasures or treasures in heaven; “*for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*” (10:34).

- “For great are the works of the Lord; they are all full of His purposes, and He is able to give beyond what we ask or think. If they did not exceed our worth, our capacity, and indeed every talent of ours, they would not be divine. Christ also encourages us in the same way when He says, ‘Fear not, little flock, for it is the Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.’ [12:32]. This incomprehensible wealth of God, showered upon us through Christ, causes us to love Him, in return, most ardently and above all else. We are drawn to Him with the fullest confidence, despising all things else, and being made ready to suffer all things for Him.” – Martin Luther, “The Pagan Servitude of the Church” (1520).

It should be noted that Jesus’ injunction against anxiety is not a general one; in the New Testament anxiety sometimes refers to a form of care that is positively regarded, such as Pauls’ anxiety for the churches (“*I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches.*” – 2 Corinthians 11:28) and Timothy’s concern for the welfare of the Philippians (“*I have no one like him who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare.*” – Philippians 2:20). It is the anxiety over material possessions that reflects a lack of trust in God, a lack of interest in the Kingdom, and a lack of generosity to those in need. It is an anxiety that leads to a false sense of

trust like that of the rich fool, whose large stores of grain and goods convinced him that “*you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.*” (12:19). His foolishness in this parable is revealed when God says to him, “*You fool! This very night your soul is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?*” (12:20). True freedom from anxiety comes when we “*strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*” (Matthew 6:33).

Jesus offers his followers a third antidote to fear over what awaits them in the future when he encourages them to “*be dressed for action and have your lamps lit*” (12:35). To “*gird up one’s loins*” meant drawing up the long outer garment and tucking it into the sash around one’s waist or hips so as to be prepared for vigorous activity. As an exhortation for readiness, the phrase appears prominently in the instructions for the celebration of the first Passover (“*This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the Passover of the LORD.*” – Exodus 12:11); the apostle Peter would later encourage his readers to “*prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed.*” (1 Peter 1:13). Another aspect of this preparation is to “*have your lamps lit*” as the people lit the lamps in the tabernacle with pure oil so that they would burn steadily (“*You shall further command the Israelites to bring you pure oil of beaten olives for the light, so that a lamp may be set up to burn regularly.*” – Exodus 27:20). Such preparation is necessary for “*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 returns.*” (12:36). A beatitude is pronounced on those who are prepared and watchful: “*Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them.*” (12:37). Watchfulness is marked by prayer, while sleeping indicated neglect and unpreparedness. The promise of the master’s generosity toward his servants takes the form of a dramatic reversal of roles: instead of serving the master, the servants will find that he now serves them, as Jesus would serve his disciples at his Last Supper:

- “And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.” – John 13:2-5.

As the servants who are ready and watchful will be blessed, Jesus warns his followers to be ready, “*for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.*” (10:40). The antidote to their anxiety over the future will not come through their knowing the exact hour of Jesus’ return (“*It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.*” – Acts 1:7), but through living each day faithful trusting that God is faithful and that all of God’s promises will be fulfilled: “*... so shall my word be that goes out of my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.*” (Isaiah 55:11).

- “Readiness means trust in God as a heavenly Father, putting away all hypocrisy, handling one’s material possessions faithfully, obeying the ethic of the kingdom, and making life a matter of constant prayer.” – Alan Culpepper.

Jesus’ antidotes to fear are rooted in the trust that is at the heart of faith. It is a trust that as God has provided for God’s people in the past – when they were in the Sinai wilderness, when they were a multitude that had come out to hear Jesus without bringing adequate provisions, or when they were disciples being sent out into the mission field – God will certainly provide for them in the present and in the future. Our faith in “*God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth*” means that we believe that God continues to provide “*all the necessities and nourishment for this body and life ... out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all!*” (*Small Catechism*). It is a confident hope that assures us that “*surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the LORD GOD is my strength and my might;*

he has become my salvation.” (Isaiah 12:2). It means no matter how uncertain or frightening our circumstances may be, “this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: the steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” (Lamentations 3:21-23).

- “Fear is mastered through faith … our trouble is simply that we attempt to confront fear without faith; we sail through the stormy seas of life without adequate spiritual boats. One of the leading psychiatrists of America has said, ‘The only known cure for fear is faith.’” – Martin Luther King, Jr., “Antidotes to Fear.”

Some forms of anxiety are positive: they grow out of a concern for the welfare and future of those we love and for whom we bear responsibility. We are vigilant in planning for our families’ futures, for our children’s education, and for our parents’ medical needs. We have concerns for the welfare of our community, for the safety of all its residents, that all may live in peace and comfort. We have concerns for the nations of the world and the health of our planet, and we take action as citizens to ensure that future generations will be able to enjoy the all that has been a blessing to us. Our attendance at the pre-retirement workshop was an act of good stewardship for both Susan and myself, that one day we might have funds to serve our needs when we are no longer working at our present pace. But these positive acts of concern for others can quickly turn into forces that entrap us in fear for our future and cause us to despair over what lies ahead of us. It is this destructive fear and anxiety for which Jesus offers us an antidote that is rooted in trusting in God to provide for us today and all of our days: *“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 kingdom.”* (Karoline Lewis).

The church’s pension plans are awaiting us for our future retirement; but the greatest treasure that awaits all of us is that which our Lord has prepared for us: the inheritance of everlasting life that offers *“strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow.”* We may have our fears, but our fears don’t have us – our anxieties will not enslave us – *“for the Father has chosen to give you the kingdom; have no fear, little flock!”* Amen.