

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

August 7, 2022 (Proper 14, Year C)
Luke 12:32-40
Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Kids say the darndest things. One Sunday school teacher asked the children in her class, "If I sold my house and my car, had a big garage sale, and gave all my money to the church, would that get me into heaven?"

"No!" the children all answered.

"If I cleaned the church every day, mowed the yard, and kept everything neat and tidy, would that get me into heaven?"

"Again the answer was, "No!"

"Well then, if I was kind to animals and gave candy to all the children and loved my husband, would that get me into heaven?"

Once more they all answered, "No!"

The teacher was impressed at their theological knowledge. So she asked, "So then how CAN I get into heaven?"

A five-year-old boy shouted out, "You gotta be DEAD FIRST!"

I heard a story about a pastor who was preaching about heaven, about eternal bliss and the joys waiting for each person on "the other side." He paused for effect and asked, "How many of you here want to GO to heaven?" All hands were raised except for an eight-year-old boy sitting in the front pew. The minister asked, "Don't you want to go to heaven, too, son?" The boy replied, "Yes, but I thought you meant TODAY!"

How about YOU? Do YOU want to go to heaven? What's your plan?

That's the message that Jesus is GIVING to his disciples in our gospel today. They need to get READY. They are NOT to be afraid. They are to sell their possessions. They are to be dressed for service and ready to open the door when the master returns. One day Jesus will return, and we must be ready.

So how DO we prepare ourselves? Actually, it's not that different from how we plan for the FUTURE in OTHER ways. Think about your RETIREMENT plan. The basic idea of retirement PLANNING is living for the FUTURE TODAY. Every year, we faithfully set aside whatever we can, NOT SPENDING it, planning AHEAD for RETIREMENT. So, our plan for the FUTURE affects how we live our lives TODAY. We prepare NOW for what we believe the FUTURE will BE.

Well, the way that Jesus describes it here, our HEAVENLY retirement plan is similar. There's a future that we KNOW is out there for us, and we live TODAY knowing that it's coming, PREPARING for it.

This FORWARD-LOOKING kind of faith is something we LIVE ALL the time as Christians. We heard it in our reading from Hebrews: "Now faith is the assurance of things HOPED for, the conviction of things NOT seen."

This week we'll have a wonderful week of Vacation Bible School, a week of learning and acting and creating and singing and playing—ALL in God's Word. The question for today is "WHY?" Why do we HAVE VBS? Does it make an IMMEDIATE change in our children? Can we SEE the change? Maybe, maybe not. But we HAVE VBS because of "the assurance of things HOPED for, the conviction of things NOT seen." The assurance that LEARNING about God in Christ BUILDS FAITH, the CONVICTION that God USES this week to touch our children's hearts. As Christians we live and

ACT on faith.

Jesus puts some flesh on that for us; he tells us HOW we are to live NOW. He says, "Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do NOT wear out, an UNFAILING treasure in heaven. For where your TREASURE is, THERE your HEART will be also."

There's a legend from the first century about the disciple Thomas who was sent by Christ to India. As the legend goes, Thomas was employed by the local king Gundaphorus to build a new palace, and he was given money to buy materials and hire workers. INSTEAD, Thomas gave the money to the POOR, but he ALWAYS ASSURED the king that his palace was rising steadily. The king became suspicious when Thomas kept putting off his requests to see the work in progress and finally SENT for Thomas.

"Have you built my Palace?" he asked.

"Yes", Thomas replied.

"Then we shall go and see it now," said the King.

Thomas answered: "You cannot see it NOW, but when you DEPART this life you shall see it. I have built you a palace in HEAVEN, by giving your money to the poor and needy of your kingdom."

The King was FURIOUS and had Thomas thrown in prison. All that night he thought about how he would put Thomas to death. The king decided to flay him and burn him with fire.

But, as the legend goes, that very night the king's BROTHER DIED and saw for HIMSELF the king's palace in heaven, which was built by Thomas' charity. He requests to return to earth, and his dead body is suddenly revived. He tells his brother of the magnificent palace awaiting him in heaven. The legend ends with Thomas freed from prison and the king and his brother becoming Christians.

So, Jesus is saying "Do not be afraid, little flock. What's more important is your HEAVENLY future. It's your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

Remember last week's gospel lesson, where the rich farmer built bigger barns to store all his grain? Well, St. Jerome, writing about 400 A.D., mentioned in a letter a woman that he remembered, that he ADMIRERD, because, as he put it, she "preferred to store her money in the STOMACHS of the NEEDY than in her purse."

The Kingdom of God has a DIFFERENT way of looking at things than WE do. According to Jesus, The BEST INVESTMENT we can make is in the Kingdom of God, investing in OTHER PEOPLE. As Matthew's version of these words puts it, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven" (Matt. 6:19-20).

I came across this story that I think illustrates WELL these DIFFERENT Kingdom values, investing in PEOPLE. It's written in the first person.

During the waning years of the depression in a small southeastern Idaho community, I used to stop by Mr. Miller's roadside stand for farm-fresh produce. Food and money were still extremely scarce, and bartering was used extensively.

One day Mr. Miller was bagging some early potatoes for me. I noticed a small boy, ragged but clean, hungrily apprising a basket of freshly picked green peas. I paid for my potatoes but was also drawn to the display of fresh green peas. (I am a pushover for creamed peas and new potatoes.) Pondering the peas, I couldn't help overhearing the conversation between Mr. Miller and the ragged boy next to me.

"Hello Barry, how are you today?"

"H'lo, Mr. Miller. Fine, thank ya. Jus' admirin' them peas ... sure look good."

"They are good, Barry. How's your Ma?"

"Fine. Gittin' stronger alla' time."

"Good. Anything I can help you with?"

"No, Sir. Jus' admirin' them peas."

"Would you like to take some home?"

"No, Sir. Got nuthin' to pay for 'em with."

"Well, what have you got to trade me for some of those peas?"

"All I got's my prize marble here."

"Is that right? Let me see it...She's a dandy. Hmmm, only thing is, this one is blue and I sort of go for red. Do you have a red one like this at home?"

"Not 'zackley...but, almost."

"Tell you what. Take this sack of peas home with you and next trip this way, let me look at that RED marble."

"Sure will. Thanks, Mr. Miller."

Mrs. Miller, who had been standing nearby, came over to help me. With a smile she said: "There are two other boys like him in our community; all three are very poor. Jim just loves to bargain with them for peas, apples, tomatoes or whatever. When they come back with their red marbles, and they ALWAYS DO, he decides he doesn't like red after all, and he sends them home with a bag of produce for a GREEN marble or an ORANGE one."

I left the stand, smiling to myself, impressed with this man. A short time later I moved away, but I never forgot this man, the boys and their bartering.

Just recently I had occasion to visit some old friends in Idaho, and while I was there learned that Mr. Miller had died. They were having his viewing that evening, and knowing my friends wanted to go, I went along. At the mortuary, we got into line to meet the relatives of the deceased. Ahead of us in line were three young men. One was in an army uniform and the other two wore nice haircuts, dark suits and white shirts... very professional looking.

They approached Mrs. Miller, standing composed by her husband's casket. Each of the young men hugged her, spoke briefly with her and moved on to the casket. Her eyes followed them as, one by one, each young man stopped briefly and placed his own hand over the hand in the casket. Each left the mortuary, awkwardly, wiping his eyes.

Our turn came to meet Mrs. Miller. I told her who I was, and mentioned the story she had told me all those years ago about the marbles. Eyes glistening, she took my hand and led me to the casket. She said, "Those three young men, who just left, were the boys I told you about. They just told me how they appreciated the things Jim "traded" them. Now, at last, when Jim couldn't change his mind about color or size, they came to pay their debt." Then she said, "We've never had a great deal of the wealth in this world, but, right now, Jim would consider himself the richest man in Idaho." Then with loving gentleness, she lifted the lifeless fingers of her husband. Resting underneath were three, exquisitely shined, red marbles.

The richest man in Idaho. Jesus said, "Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Hebrews says, "Faith is the assurance of things HOPED for, the conviction of things not seen."

You know what you're hoping for. You hope for love. You hope for peace. And if that's where your TREASURE is, then your LIFE will SHOW it.

And may we ALL live a little MORE like Mr. Miller. Amen.