

## Proper 14, Year C

August 7, 2016

Hebrews 11:1-16; Luke 12: 32-40 [*Jesus said:*] *"Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. 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. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. 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. 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. If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves. "But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."*

“What did you expect?”

It’s a rhetorical phrase that we use in our everyday speech. Every Spring, Chicago baseball fans get their hopes up. They think, “Maybe this is our year!” But then, inevitably, it all falls apart. And each time the team starts a swoon, cynical sports writers write: “Well, what did you expect?” It’s a rhetorical question, for every Chicago baseball fan knows the answer: “Not much.”

A promising bill is brought before Congress. It makes a lot of sense, we think; but it is killed in committee by partisan bickering. Well, what did you expect of Congress? A major corporation is found to have been illegally polluting the river by dumping waste. An investigation shows that equipment to treat the waste would have cost the company millions of dollars, and so they decided to illegally dump it instead. Well, what did you expect from a corporation?

The implied answer, of course, is, “Not much.” We don’t expect much.

Michael Josephson, founder of the Character Counts Coalition, says that one of the major roadblocks to improving character among us – be it in our schools, in our corporations, or in Congress – is the pervasive *cynicism* in our land. We don’t *expect* much from our institutions, or from each other; we don’t believe there is much hope that our better angels will win out. We look for ulterior motives from businesses, politicians, or even our friends and acquaintances. When disappointments come, our suspicions are confirmed: “Well, what do you expect?”

We don't expect much of our politicians or our corporations. We don't expect much of each other. We don't expect much of *ourselves*, and – I'm afraid – we don't expect much of God.

Yes, we *believe* in God, we have faith; but we're going to leave all the lights on and lock the doors nevertheless. We're going to keep building treasures here on earth, where thief comes near and moth destroys and purses wear out. It's not a lack of *faith*, we tell ourselves; it's just being prudent! And we can *convince* ourselves of that because there is an element of truth in it. We **should** plan for the future! The *problem* is that we can all too easily put our *ultimate* trust in such earthly safeguards, and not in God. Where our treasure is, there will our heart be also.

Jesuit priest and psychologist John Powell tells of his experience with his aging mother. "I used to carry my aged mother up and down the stairs of our home," Powell writes. "And she would grab onto the banister while I was carrying her up or down the stairs and hold on to it so tightly we couldn't move. I'd say, 'Momma, you have to let go of the banister or we can't move.' And she looked at me with her plaintive little eyes and said, 'I'm afraid you'll drop me.' I said, 'Momma, I'm going to drop you right now. When I count to three, I'm going to drop you!' And then she would let go, and we'd go two more steps, when she would grab on again.

"That is in microcosm my interaction with God," Fr. Powell explains. "I'm hanging on to the banisters of life. I'm hanging on to these little things that make me feel secure. But God loves me more than I love my little mother..." ("Prayer as Surrender," *Preaching Today*, Tape No. 108.)

I don't know about you, but **I** seem to hang onto the banisters all the time. I leave claw marks in them. "It's not that I don't trust God," I tell myself. "It's just that – well, God wants us to do things on our own, right? 'God helps him who helps himself' – that's in the Bible somewhere, isn't it?" [No, it isn't...] But again, the danger is that there is an element of truth in such thought: God **DOES** want us to *apply* ourselves – but when we start putting our ultimate trust in our **own** efforts, when we expect that God **WON'T** help, *won't* get involved because God wants us to do it on our own – we have forfeited trust in God, made God into a powerless figurehead, someone from whom we don't expect much. We begin to worry that if **we** don't do *all* the heavy lifting, it won't get done. We get overwhelmed with the illusion that it all depends on us, and that, if we make one false step, we will drop those we are carrying, who depend on us. This is nothing but a lack of trust in God, God's promises, God's Word, God's presence. It is the sin of low expectation.

"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for," our Epistle tells us, "the conviction of things **NOT** seen." Therein lies some of the difficulty of our scientific and technological culture, which has taught us to believe **only** what can

be seen – if not with the human eye, then with an electron microscope or with the Hubble telescope. “By faith,” our Epistle continues, “Abraham obeyed when he was called to go... not knowing **where** he was to go... By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised... These all died in faith, not having *received* what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar...”

Not having *received* what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar. And so it is that, if we are to live by faith, we must live be something OTHER than the evidence of fallible humanity all around us: partisan Congresses, greedy corporations, presidential campaigns designed to divide rather than unite, fallible friends, imperfect priests and churches. Our Scripture readings call us to live in hope, expectation, and trust, rather than clinging to the uncertain banisters of this world. “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out... For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also...”

So DON’T put your *ultimate* trust in your bank account or annuities. Congress may pass some bad laws, we may elect bad presidents, but God can still work through it all. Corporations may cheat. Your friends may do some things that hurt you and betray your trust. But none of these are the ones carrying you up the stairs; God is! You don’t have to cling for dear life to the banister.

Preacher Benjamin Reaves tells the wonderful story of a young boy whose trust and expectation we could all do well to imitate. You’ve heard me tell the story before, but it bears repeating:

He was just a little fellow. His mother died when he was just a child. His father, in trying to be both mommy and daddy, had planned a picnic. The little boy had never been on a picnic, so they made their plans, fixed the lunch, and packed the car. Then it was time to go to bed, for the picnic was the next day.

[But the boy] just couldn’t sleep. He tossed and he turned; ... the excitement got to him. Finally, he got out of bed, ran into the room where his father had already fallen asleep, and shook him. His father woke up and saw his son. He said to him, “What are you doing up? What’s the matter?”

The boy said, “I can’t sleep... I’m [too] excited about tomorrow.”

His father replied, “Well, Son, I’m sure you are, and it’s going to be a great day, but it *won’t* be great if we don’t get some sleep. So why don’t you just get back in bed, and get a good night’s rest.”

So the boy trudged off to his room and got in bed. Before long, sleep came -- to the father, that is. It wasn't long thereafter that ... the little boy [was back in his father's room]. He was pushing and shoving his father, and his father opened his eyes...

“What’s the matter now?”

The boy said, “Daddy, I just want to thank you for tomorrow.” (Benjamin Reaves, “Living Expectantly,” *Preaching Today*, Tape No. 65.)

“Do not be afraid little flock, for it is your father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”

We may not *experience* God’s kingdom each moment, each day of our lives. We may undergo many disappointments. We may not even receive the fulfillment of God’s promises. But we can nevertheless live, like Abraham and Sarah, “having seen and greeted them from afar.” We can live in the full joy of expectation and readiness, loins girded and lamps lit, and say, “Thank you, Father, for tomorrow.”

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