

This last week during Bible School, we learned about the story of the Good Samaritan, what it means to be a good neighbor, and how we are to love others even if they are very different from us. And on Wednesday, we focused on perfect love that casts out fear, the perfect love of God, that enables us to look at people who are different from us and **not** fear them.

Yes, do not fear! We need to hear this message which is also found in our gospel reading for today because one of the realities of present day twenty-first century life is that fear and anxiety seem to increasingly shape our lives. All we need do is look at the mass shootings that happen on a weekly basis or think about the past 2 ½ years of COVID and the anxiety that has grown in people's lives due to isolation and fear of this virus. And think about climate change. If we take an honest look at the facts, the science and the statistics, while thinking about the growing threat of a changing climate, it is daunting, and we cannot but feel a sense of fear. The twenty-four-hour-a-day newsfeed instills all kinds of fear in people's lives. The newsfeed communicates political voices spewing forth rhetoric that incites fear, especially fear of others. Quite frankly, fear seems to be a driving force in too much of present campaign rhetoric. There is fear of terrorism – both foreign and domestic, fear of a volatile economy and our

financial situations, fear of unemployment, war, hunger, poverty, homelessness, disease, and death. The effect these forms of fear have on our culture and our lives at times seems overwhelming.

Consequently, I think many of us have deep concerns and ask questions like:

- How might I live in order to know that I am safe and secure?
- Where is **the** place of security for me and those I love?

In the depth of these concerns, we desperately need to hear the words Jesus is speaking in Luke's gospel. Into our fear, across centuries of human experience, Jesus' teaching to us today offers an extraordinary word of comfort. The precious words Jesus speaks to us today can never be heard too often. *"Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is God's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."* These words are some of my favorite words in Scripture because I believe they are a perfect summary of the Gospel. These words provide the absolute assurance we need to hear if we are to resist the extensive fearmongering and the many voices of doom surrounding us every day.

In this passage from Luke's gospel, we hear proclaimed in no uncertain terms that God loves us as only a parent can love, and God has not only promised we will belong to God forever....but Jesus says ***it is God's good pleasure to give us the kingdom.*** God loves you! It is

God's good pleasure to give **you** the kingdom. **You** are accepted and loved **as you are** by God, your loving parent. **Do not fear!** These are words of comfort and reassurance in an increasingly threatening world. And, they are not whistling-in-the-dark comfort, but rather the reassurance that **what is seen is not all that is**, a reminder that the fear and anxiety associated with earthy living **need not have the last word in defining one's life**. Oh, yes! We **desperately** need to hear these words.

Now, quite honestly, for those of us in **this** faith community who really have more than we need, one of the fears that besets **us** has to do with our "stuff," our treasures and possessions. Fear often causes us to hold on tightly to what we have so that we can protect ourselves against what **might** happen. Fear leads us to believe that our treasures and wealth will protect us against some dark and terrible day. However, Jesus' words remind us that even our "stuff" and our earthly treasures can be destroyed. Jesus reminds us that our earthly treasures are **not ultimate**. Earthly treasure is **not** where our **true** treasure is. Jesus really challenges us to go to that deeper place in life and examine what our hearts hold dear, what is truly ultimate. He challenges us to embrace the true treasure God desires to freely give us, because it is **God's "good pleasure" to give us the**

kingdom, a treasure that is imperishable, a treasure that does not fade or fail.

Yes, wherever there is fear in our lives, Jesus speaks a surprising word of comfort to us, *“Do not be afraid little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to **give** you the kingdom.”* It is all gift! And, simply said, what comes as a gift does **not** have to be purchased with one’s wealth. Jesus’ words invite us to trust our future to this benevolent, gracious God because our future rests in the gracious promises and presence of God to us and with us. Our life rests in the God who totally accepts us as we are, and, again, it is all **gift**. Jesus’ words are powerful and timely and merit our reflection. God does **not** want to condemn us or punish us.... God wants to give us good things..... and the best thing is the promise that we will belong to God forever. You see, God is not an impersonal force behind the universe but one who has been revealed to be very much like a loving parent. And, as with all loving parents, it is God’s **pleasure to give**. What parent among us cannot understand the meaning of those words. What brings more pleasure than to give or to do for your children or other loved ones. That is how God loves us and accepts us, giving us God’s kingdom of peace and joy with God’s very self.

Now, quite frequently, people tend to see the end of today's gospel reading as threat when they hear the words about a thief breaking in. However, I really appreciate Richard Rohr's understanding of these words. He says these words are **not** threat. In fact, the opposite is true because God's kingdom is given to us and it is free. In the latter part of this reading, what we need to hear is this: ***God is like the loving, divine thief that breaks into our very soul because God loves us so very much.*** And this God who breaks into our lives, our very soul, comes in surprising ways at surprising times in life.

I think the message for us on this day is such good news. It is the message that you are to radically accept that you are radically accepted. Jesus even says that God will come and **wait** on you. As Richard Rohr says, "God is the **servant** of the soul, the deepest self. But you need to go to that deep place, that place where God is always working to break into your life. Quite honestly, if you don't go there, everything you do is quite superficial and nothing in your life of faith is going to change." And, by the way, that is another reason why I encourage you to participate in some form of Christian education this Fall so you are taken to that deeper place.

Jesus' words to us continue as he tells us we need to be vigilant. We need to keep alert and look for signs of the kingdom breaking through in

our lives and in the world, signs of love and compassion and justice. We must learn to read between the lines and see what is really happening in **our** lives, to intentionally look at what **we** are **really** doing. We need to see and accept and **learn** from what we are doing, and maybe even **change** or be **transformed**! But, to do this, we must go to that deeper place in our soul. We have to ask, is what we are doing of ultimate importance? As Richard Rohr says, "Most people are on cruise control and nothing in their life changes. So, God has to break in like a divine thief." You see, God is always and forever giving. Any change in this equation between us and God only comes from our side. God is the divine giver.

So, are you ready to receive and accept that you are totally accepted? Are you ready to go to that deep place within yourself, to spend time focusing on the God whose **pleasure** it is to **give** you the kingdom? Are you ready to **let go** of your fear and place your faith and trust in this God who delights in you?

Oh yes, I **really** needed to hear these words on this day.

Have no fear little flock, have no fear, little flock,
For the Father has chosen to give **you** the Kingdom.
Have no fear, little flock!