

Have no Fear, Little Flock

**A Sermon by Pastor John W. Bengston
Augustana Lutheran Church
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Here we go again! Just last Sunday in the Gospel that came from an earlier portion of Luke 12 we read about the rich man whose abundant crops tempted him to tear down his barns and build bigger ones, a man so selfish that thinking of others was beyond his capacity. Now today still in chapter 12 of Luke, we are told, “Sell your possessions, and give alms” (Luke 12:33). Money talk! This section of Luke dwells on wealth and the tremendous interference it can be in the lives of disciples, followers of Jesus. Reading this portion of Luke might lead us to think that Jesus saw wealth as one of the greatest perils to faith.

The essential lesson that our Lord teaches tells us is not to be so tied to our possessions or wealth that we live in fear of not having such. The sign that we are so bound to our possessions and wealth is if we can give them away –“sell your possession and give alms” (Luke 12:33), said Christ Jesus. Being worried about my balance sheet, or you about yours, makes it a god over us. Life is so much more than assets and liabilities, P & L statements, GNP, and the like. The real treasure is in the Kingdom of God which Jesus brings to us, to me and you. “Where you treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Luke 12:34) said Jesus. He invites us to treasure the Kingdom, not our possessions.

That seems so obvious, but it also seems obvious that we strive for monetary achievement and in many ways are forced to do so. I refer you to last Sunday’s sermon.

As we look at the setting for the reading from Luke this morning, Jesus was addressing people with wealth. Peasants at that time, and the population was about 75% peasants, would not have had any wealth to consider; they all lived from day to day which is why Jesus several times used “a day’s wage” in his teachings, for example his statement in Luke 10, “...the laborer deserves his wages” (Luke 10:7). What we read today would have been quite meaningless to people who literally lived hand to mouth. Here he must be speaking to people who had possessions and wealth.

In that light, we could chose to dismiss the text and say, “Well, thank goodness he is not talking to me, for I’m not wealthy. Just a little reminder: if I have or you have \$2200 of assets to our names, we are richer than 50% of the people in the world. Maybe Jesus is speaking to us. Also, after last Sunday’s sermon, some asked me if the parable about the rich man meant we were to get rid of everything? First of all, each one of us has to come to our own way of responding to the challenge Jesus places before us. Second, I understand that parable to be telling me, us, that if all we do is accumulate and hoard for ourselves we’re missing the point of life and living in Christ’s name. It’s disobedience.

In the past week, I read two pieces in the media that connected to the message from the Luke passage for today. One was about a family that divested themselves of everything except what they could put on a 43 foot sailboat. The family consisted of Tom, the husband and father, Kathy, the wife and mother, and three children Kelena, Jena, and Ben, the oldest, Kelena, being 11 when the five of them set out to circumnavigate the globe. Tom and Kathy were very typical middle class folks – a two career household (he a psychologist and she an ICU nurse) with kids. They had a big house, plenty of everything and – as Tom said – plenty of everything which left them feeling not much of anything, save frustration and want.

83 months ago they set sail from Severna, Maryland, on the Chesapeake Bay. They were not sailing all the time, for instance they spent a year-and-a-half in a New Zealand harbor. Other stops were months long. When asked about the people they met, Tom said that the happiest people seemed to be the Vanuata (van u AT a) people who owned the least and smiled the most and that stop turned out to be one of their favorites, a three month stop.

When they finally returned to Severna, MD, they stayed at Tom's parents home, and Kelena, having her own bedroom for the first time in seven years, said, "It was very still, very roomy, and very lonely."

The reason for this adventure? The parents, especially Kathy, decided they craved less stuff and more time together. Maybe there is something to this teaching about sell your possessions. I did not get any hint that they gave alms to the poor, but at least they detached themselves from most of the trappings we all feel so are necessary.

Then, on Wednesday of last week, the news carried the story of an effort led by Bill Gates and Warren Buffett called **The Giving Pledge**. This effort tries to persuade the richest people in America to commit giving the majority of their wealth away either during their lifetime or after death. They are first aiming at billionaires, so I know I'm not on their radar screen. How about you? In our country, about 400 people are now billionaires, and so far 40 of them have committed to this cause. One of them, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg said, "If you want to do something for your children and show how much you love them, the single best thing – by far – is to support organization that will create a better world for them and their children."

In this action is an echo of today's reading from Luke, "Sell your possessions and give alms." Now it's pretty obvious that if a billionaire gives away half of his or her wealth today, he or she would still have \$500,000,000. So none of these people will end up poor. I still find it commendable that "The Giving Pledge" is challenging people with extraordinary means to give away large sums. That's a move in a godly direction, even if those folks don't interpret it that way.

We are all challenged to be generous and to live on less than we do now. Thanks be to God for the people of Augustana Lutheran Church, Denver, for you contribute in significant ways to the mission and ministry of this congregation and beyond – like the

World Hunger gifts, support for MetroCaring, the Four Mile Resource Center, and more with money and time all of which meets human needs.

Did you hear the opening words of this morning's Gospel? "Have no fear, little flock." Fear is a powerful motivator and is one of the reasons we want to hold on to what we have. Lots of us worry about money, and for many reasons. Jesus speaks, "Fear not." Did you know that the most common teaching of Jesus is, "Fear not." It's not love God, love your neighbor, or follow me, but "Fear not." We are called to live by faith, not fear, and faith demonstrates itself in trust, gratitude, and generosity. When we treasure most God's Kingdom, we are freed from fear. As Jesus said in today's Gospel, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Luke 12:34).

The Lord Jesus Christ does forgive us when we let fear dominate or when we let our financial dreams and needs dominate, or when we use "that's not my problem" as an excuse for being responsible for others. There is forgiveness, cleansing, and renewal. We Lutherans stress and rely on God's abundant grace, and thankfully that grace restores us daily as disciples and servants. After grace from the Lord comes faithfulness from God's children. Lord, help us to be faithful, not fearful. Amen.