

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, August 12, 2007

Sermon Text: Luke 12:32-40

Let us pray. Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of every heart be acceptable unto You, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I heard a statistic this past week. I'm not sure how they find it out, but one of the statistics that they mentioned was that 16% of churchgoers have at least one time checked their e-mail during the sermon. I'm going to ask the ushers to make sure that doesn't happen today.

We live in two worlds – the physical world and the spiritual world. We mix them up in odd ways, and a story I like illustrates that. A family's pet dog gave birth, and had five puppies. The parents told them they could keep one of the puppies, and had to give away the others, but the enterprising young son in the family said that he was going to sell the puppies. The father overheard him saying his prayers by his bedside that night, and he prayed, “Dear God, Help me sell these puppies for \$10,000 each.” Well, the father went to work, came home the next day, and said, “Son, did you sell any of the puppies?” He said, “Well, I sold only one.” He said, “Well, did you get your price?” He said, “Yes, the girl next door traded me two \$5,000 kittens.”

God works in mysterious ways.

When I stand up here for a funeral, and say there is more to life than these bodies, there is some comfort in some distant, beyond-this-world reality – which Jesus pointed to and promised – we call heaven or God's eternal kingdom. When I do that, people are comforted, but when I stand up here and speak not about us going, but the kingdom coming into the here and now, sometimes I get puzzled looks. Sometimes I get head-patting ridicule, and sometimes terror. We don't mind the kingdom as a final destination, but we mind very much some unknown, unstoppable Godly upheaval coming here into our world, into our figured out lives, into our carefully-compromised, comfortable existence and messing up what we've got.

Some people, some people have it bad in this world, but most of us, most of the time, we've got it okay. We don't yearn for God's kingdom to come in the here and now and change things up. As far as things go, mostly we're up. Any radical change can only bring us down. What if my view of God has nothing to do with God really? What if all of our constructs are meaningless and God is indeed coming, not just to cradle us when we die, but here, sometime to set things right, and justice for the downtrodden, and bring justice on the heads of the selfish and the dispassionate.

The coming of the kingdom of God is a day of rejoicing for those who believe and have yearned to see God. Scripture speaks of it as a day of horror and judgment for those who have known, but ignored God's will, known but turned their backs on what they felt in their bones God would have them do. Live and love and give as Christ did.

Well, mixed feelings or not, nevertheless, the Scripture for today says, “Fear not.” Fear not. Do not live in fear, little flock. It pleases your Father to give you the kingdom.

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Now, I am not sure if we are more afraid of missing out on the kingdom of God OR its eventual showing up. Can we say no thank you? No thank you, God. I like myself just as I am. I like my construct of you just as I have made it. I like the world and its comforts just fine. Leave me out of your kingdom come. I'm having a fine time in this flawed world as it is, of course, there is suffering and poverty and hatred and violence and evil and death and disease, but that's mostly other people. They may yearn for your kingdom come. They may even mean it when they pray it as Jesus taught. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven. As for me, I'm not suffering. I'm not poor. I don't hate much. I'm not violent in obvious ways. I've done away with evil by simply deciding not to believe in it. Disease has been handled so far by my excellent insurance and money enough to buy cures and care. Maybe one day when death approaches, maybe then I'll think of your kingdom as a place to rest from my labors such as they are. As far as the here and now, no thank you to your kingdom come. No thank you to your offer to give me the kingdom. I've got it just fine. I already have my reward.

You'll remember that Jesus, before He began His ministry, was tempted in the wilderness and offered earthly power and earthly fame and ample earthly needs met. He rejected all of these, and instead sought to do God's will for God's kingdom. It seems to me that most of us would have taken the first offer. Most of us to some degree have already put our hope and trust right here and now, and in God only in the there and then when we die. It's odd. How very odd when Jesus lived and taught and suffered for living out the knife's edge of God's incoming kingdom, and He paid a price for it, for living so differently. How odd that we don't think we are called to live differently.

It may be timid preachers' fault. It may be our fault. Have we not made it clear that those who claim Christ are to pray for the power to live like and to love like and to have the values of Jesus Christ? We don't you know. Christians on average, who claim to follow Christ, live and spend and grudge and feud and spite and squander and serve self pretty much like our neighbors who claim no spiritual beliefs at all. I worry that we do not rejoice in Jesus' word that we should not fear, for it is the Father's goodwill to give us the kingdom. I worry that we do not rejoice because we are sold out to the world and we have sat down satisfied with the little or the lot that we have.

God says here, "Put your heart and your treasure in me and my will, and live as Christ lived in a new reality," and we say very often no thank you. I don't want to appear odd. I don't want to appear different. I don't want to tithe my money. I just want a little religion for appearances sake, not enough to change my life, my love, my spending, myself. Jesus seems to assume that we would fear not being included in God's plans to reclaim and change the world and us and that we might fear God as well because of our sense of sin and guilt, but we don't fear God. We rarely think of God.

For many people, God has become a fluffy warm and soft thought like a towel just out of the dryer. Who would ever fear such a thought? Worship is supposed to be an awesome thing, supposed to bring us into a mindset, an awareness of both sin and grace, an attitude of praise and prayer. Worship is supposed to have an audience of one, not me. The audience is God. God is the audience of worship, and if we feel that for even a moment, we will be shaken to the core. If we feel and understand. I, when I pray, am speaking to

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God. I, when I sing, am singing to God. I'm hearing the will and the word of God through the Scripture and through the sermon. Maybe not fear exactly, but awe would be a better word. Shouldn't there at least be moments of awe? Instead, for most of us, most of the time, we confuse worship with performance. I do think what the children are doing today is wonderful, and it is worshipful. They are giving of themselves so sincerely and from their hearts. There are times when Joyce performs well, and we tell her, and I perform well on occasion, and you tell me, and the choir, and the children's sermon people, and the acolytes and the ushers all do their jobs with appropriate respect and decorum, and we say so to them as if they did it for us to see. We are not here for each other to see. I do hope we are not here for each other to see. We are here to worship God, the one God who is the one beyond whom there is no other, the uncreated Creator, the holy, infinitely-loving giver of life and eternal life, God.

I like this story about a boy's sense of awe going to God's presence, but he had it a little wrong. He was visiting with his father in New York City for the first time, and they got aboard an elevator that was going to take them to the top of the Empire State Building. As this high-speed elevator got past the 60th floor, the little boy looked up at his father, and says, “Daddy, does God know we're coming?” My question is do we know, do we really know? God is here. God is here and now.

The one who loves us enough to allow us to walk in ways contrary to His will. That is sin. He loves us and calls us back to a more perfect way, to His kingdom way, the way we have seen and known in Jesus Christ. God has given us this way home, this way into His arms, not just when we die, but now for a change of direction and a change of focus today, now! So often in thought, word and deed, time, treasure and talent, we say, thank you for the offer, God, but I'm fine. Now, if I should ever die, we can talk, but as for my life, I think I'll keep it for myself. As for your kingdom, you can keep that.

It reminds me of the verse in Matthew 10:39, in fact, it explains that verse. Those who try to keep their own life will lose it, but those who lose their life or give their life for my sake, will gain it. In case you've ever wondered what that Scripture was about, I think this is the point. Time, treasure, talents. If we say no thank you to God, I'm fine, if I should ever die, we'll talk, but for now, I'm going to keep my life, and for now, you can keep your kingdom, I think that is what that verse is about.

There was a day when preachers used to have to undo the bad theology of generations of fire and fear and brimstone preaching. I think we have succeeded in undoing that and then some. Not only is there no fear or fire, there is no particular desire for the good that God has offered us. It is the Father's goodwill that He gives us the kingdom. We say maybe later. I'm too busy with my life, my new wife, my new car, my new boat, my house, my hip, my hair, my hobbies.

I look out and see we do have some guests today, but some regulars who are irregular. Summer is proof, at least to me, that church is where you go when you have absolutely nothing better to do. What of God and who God is and God's worthiness to be worshiped? God is the audience even in this moment for our thoughts and our prayers and our hymns of praise. What of God who has sought and found us and desires to offer

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us new life, new love, new hearts more like Jesus? What of God’s kingdom? God is pleased to give it. Why are we not pleased to receive it? Fear not little flock. It has pleased your father to give you the kingdom.

You need to hear the Gospel, the good news that God, the God who is a gracious God. He is for us. He wills life. He wills wholeness of life for each of us. It is your invitation to life and freedom and release, to come out from under the pressures and out from under the pleasures that keep us from hearing what Jesus is saying about God. We need God. Life is not whole or holy apart from God. Sin and guilt are real spiritual forces, which cannot be ignored forever. God in Christ has given us a way to overcome and live free and connected lives with God and with each other and with our true selves.

Now, this text does talk about giving away your money. If you hang too tight to money, you’ll miss what is really important. I think that’s what we really need to take from this text. As you are leaving this earth, and I’ve been by the bedside of multimillionaires, as you are leaving this earth, the only thing that comforts is friends and family and faith. As I said this morning, I have never seen anyone as they are leaving ask for their checkbook or their stock portfolio. It brings no comfort. You want friends and you want family and you want your faith. Money simply distorts our vision of what is important. You see, you can spend meaningful time with friends and family and faith right now. You need not wait for the end of your life. What usually get in the way of that time are money and the pursuit of it or the ostentatious use of it or the divisions that it can cause.

As I close, I want to share with you an exercise that Hospice uses for the families and for the patients there. It’s an exercise where they ask you to write your 25 treasures, your five most-prized possessions, and you can think of these, your five favorite activities, your five most valuable body parts, for the patients do lose use of body parts as the disease progresses, five values that are important to you and five people that you love the most. That’s your 25 treasures. Then, as you are seeking, or they’re seeking to teach you to understand what it’s like to be your loved one, the patient there at Hospice, they tell you a story to imagine that you are getting some terminal disease and the progression that goes with it, and during the story, they pause and they tell you to strike out one, and you choose. Then strike out two, and they ask you to strike out three until there are no treasures left. My illustration does not end there because life does not end there.

The good news is that God doesn’t have to be on the list of loss. Friends will go away. Family will go away. Possessions will go away. Jesus calls them things of dust and rust and decay. Faith, faith in God is the one thing, which lasts. Once I shed, or at least hold more loosely, the treasures of this life, then I can rest more securely and completely in the arms of Jesus Christ. I do not have to die to do that. I can do that today. You can do that today. It is God’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Reach out and accept it. Live in it and grow in it and pray to God for the power, the spiritual power to become more like His son, as you live, as you love, as you forgive, as you notice and have compassion on others in need, pray for the power to live now in the kingdom which is coming. Let us not wait till the end of our lives to have hope in God’s power to make all things new. Amen.