

9 Pentecost
August 7, 2022

Jesus said to his disciples, “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” Fear is a powerful emotion. Many things frighten us in today’s world. The horror that unfolded in a Ulvalde Texas school or in a supermarket in Buffalo New York are stark reminders of the dangerous and fear filled world in which we reside. We are frightened to send our children to school and tragic events of the recent past can even make us fearful to come to church ourselves. We fear the stranger and the person who is “different” from us. Pandemics make us anxious about our health. We are fearful about the future. Will I have enough money saved when I retire. How will global warming affect my children and grandchildren? We fear new ideas that challenge our traditional ways of thinking. We fear that which we cannot change, and then ironically, we fear change itself. We fear our own mortality and the inevitability of death.

But fear is not a modern phenomenon. People of every generation have faced their own fears and apprehensions. History is replete with stories of wars, plagues, famines, and injustice. Fear seems to be a universal part of the human condition. It is to the tension between fear on the one hand and the kind of life our Christian faith calls us to live that Jesus addresses in today’s Gospel.

Although separated by 2000 years, the disciples no doubt were confronted with things in their lives that caused fear and distress. So, the disciples must have been overwhelmed with joy to hear Jesus’ loving and calming words. “Don’t be afraid little flock” were as comforting and reassuring to those first followers of Jesus as they are when we hear them today.

If Jesus had stopped right there, everything would have been fine. But as he so often does, Jesus does not stop.....

With his very next words, that old stomach-turning fear returns. “Sell your possessions and give alms.” Is there anyone here this morning who would honestly admit that even the thought of losing all your possessions is not truly terrifying? Whether it material wealth, or our social status, or our personal health, losing what we think we “own”, “possess” or “control” can be a terrifying and fearful thought. And did you notice Jesus did not say, “Sell SOME of your possession.” He said, “Sell your possessions”—period--as in all your possessions! Those are frightening words! Jesus is saying in effect, “Folks, I will give you the gift of my Kingdom, but accepting the gift demands a response on your part.” With the gift comes responsibility.

“Fear not little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the Kingdom.” God wants us to have the gift. It gives God pleasure, and he yearns for us to accept and enjoy the gift of being in relationship with him. We cannot do anything to earn the gift, but we do have a responsibility in accepting the gift.

So, what is our response, our responsibility of being given the gift of God’s Kingdom? Jesus says, “I will give you my Kingdom, but you must give me all your possessions, everything you claim to be your own. Is Jesus really saying that my response to accepting the gift of being in relationship with him is that I must give him everything and live homeless on the streets? Does Jesus really mean that I must give him literally everything, even my physical life? Perhaps for some it might mean all of that.

In our *Episcopal Book of Lesser Feasts and Fasts*, we remember and recognize men and women whose lives represent heroic commitment to Christ and who have borne witness to their faith even at the cost of their lives. On August 14, we remember one of those who accepted the gift and bore the responsibility.

Jonathan Myrick Daniels was a twenty-six-year-old seminarian from New Hampshire in 1965. Jonathan felt called to take a leave from seminary and go to Selma, Alabama, to work in the Civil Rights movement to help secure the right of all citizens to vote. Jailed for joining a picket line, Jonathan and his companions were unexpectedly released. Knowing they were in danger, four of them walked to a small store. As sixteen-year-old Ruby Sales reached the top step into the store, a man with a gun appeared, cursing at the girl. Jonathan pulled her aside to shield her from the threat. As a result, he took a point-blank shot from a 12-gauge shotgun and died instantly. Jonathan's response to receiving God's gift was the giving of his own life.

Thankfully, mercifully, most of us will not be called to respond as Jonathan was in receiving the gift of the Kingdom. But the fact that we are not called to make the "ultimate sacrifice" does not mean that we have no responsibilities. Each of us are given big responsibilities upon receiving the gift of God's Kingdom.

When Jesus says, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also", he is talking about where our priorities lie, he is speaking about what we hold to be of ultimate importance in our lives. Jesus is talking about the responsibilities that come with accepting the gift of the Kingdom of heaven—the responsibility of giving not just our material wealth but in the giving of the totality of our selves—our hearts, our mind, and our soul.

When we accept the gift of God's grace, we also accept and assume the responsibility of proclaiming by word and example the Good News of God in Christ. With the gift of the Kingdom comes the responsibility of seeking and serving Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as our self—especially those neighbors, who do not look, speak, or act or live as we do.

When we accept the gifts of God's love, God's forgiveness, and God's mercy we are also accepting the responsibility to respect the dignity of every human being and we are to put into practice that same kind of love, that same kind of forgiveness and that same kind of mercy. And we all know that practicing that kind of radical love, forgiveness and mercy can sometime seem more difficult and frightening than the loss of our possessions or even our very lives. Whether we want to admit it or not, many of our "possessions" not just our money and physical possessions are tough to give up. We want to cling to old hatreds, prejudices, jealousies, and resentments. They are "ours". We earned them. We deserve them. We don't want to give them up. Jesus say, "If you want the gift of being in relationship with me, those possessions too must go."

The words of the baptismal covenant are our call to faithful discipleship. Those words lived out daily are our response to receiving the gift of the Kingdom of God. Faithful discipleship does offer us comfort, peace, and solace, but with that comfort, peace and solace comes responsibility. We are called to love and to respond to those things that God loves, his people and his creation.

There was a song a number of years ago by Janis Joplin (no relation) entitled, *Me and Bobby McGee*. One of the lines contained these words, "Freedom is just another word for nothing else to lose." While I think it is safe to say that Janis is probably not going to go down as one of the great theologians of our time, there is a truth in her lyrics. True freedom—freedom from fear is only found as we lose ourselves to something greater than ourselves. True freedom is found as we lose ourselves in service to others. True freedom is found as we let go of what we claim as our own and lose ourselves to God's plan for our lives.

We will leave here in a few minutes and return to an anxious and fearful world. Into that world Jesus calls us to move into a life of responsible faith....

Listen to the words from the collect for the eighth Sunday after the Epiphany. "Preserve us from faithless fears and worldly anxieties, that no clouds of this mortal life hide us from the light of that love which is immortal."

God is calling you and me to live faithful, not fearful lives and to share joyously with others the gift of God's immeasurable love.

Amen.