

## It's the Father's Good Pleasure to Give Us the Kingdom

Today's Gospel passage picks up where we left off last Sunday. Jesus has just told the crowd his Parable of the Rich Fool, the landowner who responded to an especially bountiful harvest by deciding to build bigger barns so he could hoard it all. God tells the rich fool that his life will end that very night, asking him the haunting question, "the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" Jesus told the crowd, "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God." It's a straightforward lesson – share what you have with your family, friends and community, trusting that God will continue to provide.

In today's passage, Jesus is privately debriefing his disciples, something he often did after speaking to a crowd. Our passage skips Jesus telling them not to worry about what they'll eat, drink or wear because the Father already knows their needs and will provide. It picks up with Jesus instructing the disciples not to be afraid, "for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." He urges them to sell their goods and give alms, observing that "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

But then, Jesus gives the disciples less comforting advice. He tells them to be "dressed for action" and to keep their lamps lit, like slaves waiting for their master to come home any minute. Jesus promises that the master will reward those slaves who stay awake to greet him by serving them a meal. That image takes a darker turn when Jesus likens the coming of the Son of Man to a thief breaking into someone's house in the middle of the night. All of a sudden, God's impending arrival doesn't feel so benign.

Our Old Testament passage portrays a God whom we might be wise to fear. In Isaiah's vision, God tells the Hebrew people that he is so fed up with their rebellious ways that he doesn't want to receive so much as a single additional offering from them. No prayers, no incense, no

animal sacrifices, *nothing*. He won't look at them, he won't listen to them, and he certainly won't help them unless they clean up their act. Adonai is clear – if his children are “willing and obedient,” they will “eat the good of the land.” But if they continue to rebel, they'll “be devoured by the sword.” Gosh, why would anybody be afraid of a God like that?

Both of these passages are problematic today. Citizens of a nation born in revolution, Americans are a rebellious bunch. Being ordered to stay on our toes waiting for a God who'll punish us if we aren't standing at attention whenever he finally deigns to drop in triggers resentment. Why should we worship a God who likes to play gotcha games like a thief in the night? A God who'll turn a deaf ear to our prayers and let us die by the sword unless we do exactly what he wants every last second of every single day? Is our God really such a capricious tyrant? No, he's not, but we have to untangle these Scriptures to see that.

Let's start with our passage from Isaiah. It was written around the time of the Babylonian exile, when Isaiah and his fellow prophets struggled to explain why Adonai would allow his chosen people to be conquered and abducted from their promised land. Without challenging Isaiah's vision, I wonder if Adonai's tone was different than a first reading suggests. The LORD our God sounds angry, but I think he was mostly hurt that his beloved children kept rejecting him. As Isaiah tells it, the people had not done justice or loved mercy, nor had they walked humbly with their God. Worst of all, they had returned again and again to worshipping pagan idols, even though the very first of their ten commandments was to have no god before the LORD himself.

Personally, I've never understood idol worship. Whether it's a lump of clay, metal or wood, an idol is an inanimate object with no power whatsoever to make the slightest difference in anybody's life, no matter how many gallons of blood, sweat and tears are poured over it. But

that doesn't keep people from being bewitched by them. We moderns may not worship golden calves, but too many of us worship unattainable fantasies, possessions or celebrities. How many of us squander our joy, convinced we can't be happy unless we see a certain number on our paycheck or the bathroom scale? How many of us go deep into debt buying things we don't need and can't afford to impress people we don't like? How many of us hero-worship famous actors or athletes? One of the most popular television shows in recent history was called "American Idol," but the winners were performers, not gods, no matter what *People* magazine might say.

Jesus was right – it *is* the Father's good pleasure to give us the kingdom. The trouble is, he's so faithful in giving us the kingdom that it's easy to take his gifts for granted. Every minute of every day, God blesses us with air, light, warmth, gravity, water, food, rest, beauty, and *life*. Even when human beings cruelly snatch those things away from each other, God continues to shower gifts on us, the deserving and undeserving alike.

There's nothing transactional about God's grace. In his book, *Tokens of Trust*, former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams drives home the uncomfortable point that we human beings have absolutely nothing that God needs. God is complete and self-sufficient in Godself, happy to be God and to be generous with us. We can't bargain with God because we have nothing to barter. Everything comes from God, and God can make more of whatever God desires. God's gifts flow down to us in a one-way stream, and our only way to repay God's generosity is to gratefully share those gifts with those who have less than we do.

Although we have nothing God needs, we do have one thing that God desires: our love. The Bible tells many stories, but perhaps the most poignant is the story of God reaching out over and over again, seeking the love of his wayward children. As our liturgy admits, we rebelled

against God and wandered far away. Even after God sent his only begotten Son to save us from sin and death, humanity is still an awfully long way from home.

If you've ever had kids, you know how much it hurts when they turn away from you to fixate on things that will hurt them. God telling the Hebrews that he didn't want their half-hearted sacrifices is not unlike a frustrated parent telling a sulky teenager that dumping a few unrinsed plates in the dishwasher won't make up for staying out all night and wrecking the car. Like any parent, the Father wants us to behave ourselves because it's good for us, and to return because we love him, not because we're trying to bargain our way into heaven.

We should also remember that Jesus was talking to his disciples in a particular setting, using analogies they would recognize. We might have trouble imagining a slave eagerly awaiting the master's arrival, but maybe the disciples understood things differently. Without hearing Jesus's tone of voice, we can't know if he was solemn or teasing when he talked about coming like a thief in the night. We can only fall back on what we know, and we know that the Father has given all of us enough gifts to deserve our gratitude, trust and love many times over.

Big, powerful things like predatory beasts and hurricanes frighten us because we know they can hurt us. Nothing is bigger or more powerful than the Father, so we're terrified of him. Our fear makes idols look safe, but they just distract us from relationship with our real, loving God. It's the Father's good pleasure to give us the many gifts that keep us alive and bring us real joy. When we learn to do good, to recognize and cherish God's gifts, we come to love God with respect, not fear. As Jesus said, where our treasure is, there will our hearts be, also. God showers us with treasure – it's only right to give him our hearts. May we learn to recognize the God-given gifts in our own lives, and give loving thanks to God for them every day. *Amen.*