

Let Your Loins Be Girded
A Sermon on Luke 12:22-40
Proper 14
August 11, 2019

Introduction

Last week we talked about the rich man who tore down his barns and built bigger barns. God calls the man a fool because he stores up possessions for himself and is not rich toward God. Jesus leaves us hanging about what it means to be rich toward God.

Jesus unpacks that story today.

First Move: God Knows What You Need

First, Jesus has to deal with the anxiety of his followers. The lectionary skips nine verses that address the anxiety. We put them back in and Judy read them for you.

Jesus says, “Do not be anxious about your life. Do not be anxious about what you eat or what you wear.”

Jesus is directing this speech to the disciples, who have chosen to serve God instead of seeking riches. They may be anxious about how they will be fed if they are not working as farmers and fishermen. They are also anxious about their clothes. Clothes were necessary for warmth, but people also used clothes in those days to show their status, by wearing rich luxurious clothes. The rich man who ignored Lazarus at his gates wore linen underwear and purple robes. Today we still make a statement about ourselves by the clothes we wear. The teenager who wears Goth clothing is making a statement that they are different. The businessman who works a coat and a tie is making a statement that he is a person of authority and is entitled to respect.

Jesus makes an argument from the greater to the lesser. God provides for the birds of the sky. The flowers that grow wild in the field neither reap

nor sow nor gather into barns, but are they not clothed more magnificently than Solomon in all his glory? Are you not worth more than they?

The challenge to trust in God's providence does not mean that everyone should quit their jobs and sell all their possessions. The text is directed to people who are sowing, reaping and gathering into barns. Women sow. Men reap crops and gather them into barns. The text is directed to women and men and is intended to reassure them that their work will bear fruit.

People are justifiably anxious about having their basic needs met. Ancient Israel was a subsistence society. Most people were barely getting their basic needs met. More than one third of the people in the world today don't get enough to eat. The hymns about God's eye on the sparrow may sound hollow to them.

This is where the community comes in. In the Bible it is the responsibility of the community to make sure that everyone has enough to eat. This comes from the Torah. Leviticus 25 sets forth holiness codes for protecting the most vulnerable people in society. We see prophets raging against kings because they are violating the holiness codes and neglecting the poor in their community.

Jesus goes a step further. The disciples are neither sowing nor reaping nor gathering into barns. They have left their families and their fields to follow Jesus. They are itinerant evangelists. They are even more food insecure than the people of Israel who are working to support themselves.

Jesus tells the disciples that they need to trust that the new community that he is forming will take care of them. Jesus says that being anxious is the opposite of having faith. He calls the disciples ones of little faith. If you trust God, then you will trust that God will provide for you while you are doing God's work.

The choice most people make is to rely upon themselves. That is where their trust ultimately lies. Be self-sufficient. Look out for Number One. Riches or possessions symbolize that. The goal of many people today is to generate enough wealth to ensure that they will have financial security. Pay off all your bills and save for retirement. Then you will be safe.

The problem is, many people find that wealth alone is not enough for security. Even if you start saving for retirement when you are in your 20's and build up your retirement account to several hundred thousand dollars, you can get cancer when you are 55. Your medical bills can wipe out your savings. You can still lose your life or the life of a loved one in a car accident. You can still get injured or disabled or die young.

The uncertainty of life causes people to worry. The Old Testament sometimes compares human life to the grass of the field, to emphasize how short our lives are in comparison to God's eternal reign. We hear this lament in Psalm 103:15-16:

As for mortals their days are like grass,
they flourish like a flower of the field,
for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
and its place knows it no more.

The Psalm goes on to contrast the ephemerality of humans with the eternity of God: "But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting."

If God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and thrown in the oven tomorrow, will not God also clothe you? There was a shortage of wood in ancient Israel, so grass was thrown into ovens to serve as fuel. We cannot find meaning in life by relying on ourselves, especially our wealth. Any security that you find by relying on yourself will be illusory. We find meaning outside ourselves.

We should read this passage as poetry instead of prose. The sparrows and the lilies of the field are symbols for the least of these. God cares for the least of these; God also cares about you. Our possessions don't care about us. Whatever stuff we accumulate, a library of books or a fully-loaded truck or a beautiful home, does not fulfill us.

We are like the Gentiles. It is the Gentiles, the nations of the world, that strive after these things, and they are still anxious. That is our culture today.

Your Father knows that you need your basic needs met. Instead, strive for the kingdom, and these things will be given to you.

Second Move: Strive for the Kingdom

“Fear not, little flock.” Jesus is speaking as a pastor to the flock. The etymology of pastor is from the Latin *pascere*, which means to feed, and *pastor*, which means herdsman or shepherd. Jesus will feed you. When Jesus ascends to heaven, the new community that Jesus is building, the church, will feed you.

“God has already given you the kingdom.” Give is in the past tense. The kingdom is already a present reality. It is breaking in around us, and we only catch glimpses of it.

What keeps us from focusing on the kingdom is our possessions. They distract us. If you can't keep from worrying about your possessions, get rid of them. Sell your possessions and give alms to the poor. It could also be translated as give charity to the poor. There were no charities then. To give alms means to give your money or your food directly to poor people. That is how God will provide for the poor. You will be God's agent. You, the church, will give to them.

Focus instead on “purses that do not grow old, a treasure in the heavens that never gives out.”

“Where your treasure is, there also your heart will be.” If your treasure is your possessions, you will focus your time and money on accumulating possessions and protecting them. You will be receptive to the message of advertisers.

If your treasure is the kingdom of God, you will never have to worry about a thief taking it away or a moth destroying it. You will be more attracted to the good news in the Bible than to advertisers.

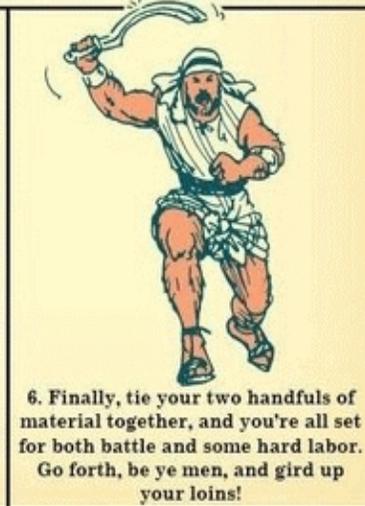
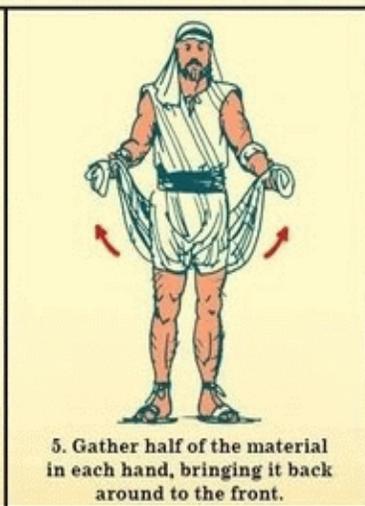
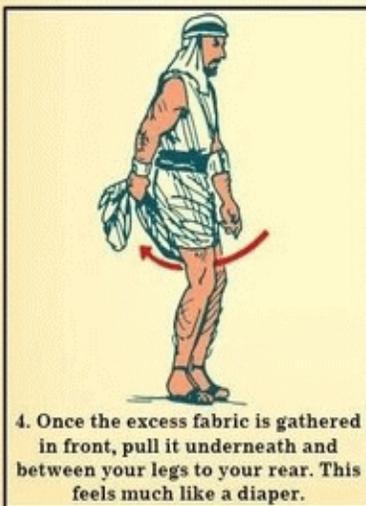
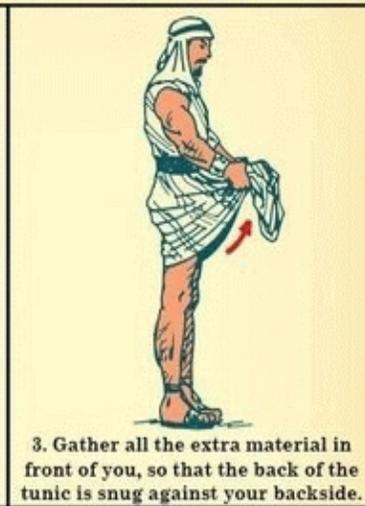
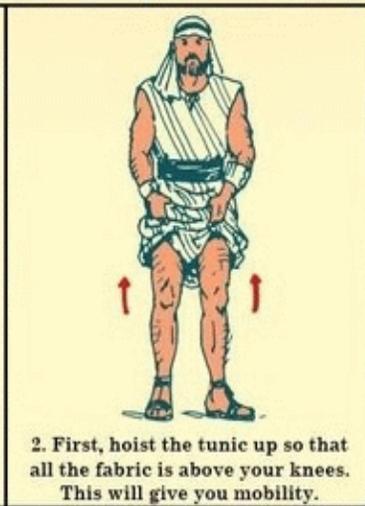
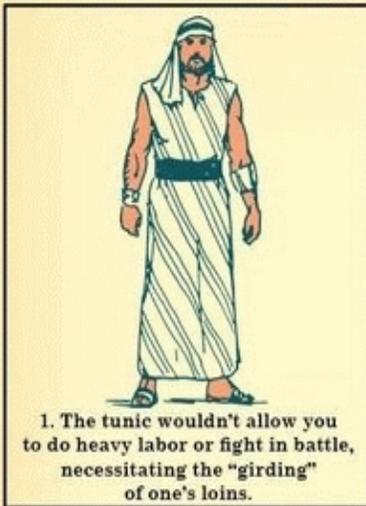
Put your energy into seeking the kingdom. “Keep your loins girded and your lamps burning.”

Loins mean the area around your hips. Gird means to encircle with a belt or a band of cloth.

People in the first century wore two layers of clothes. They wore a tunic as an outer garment. It was like a robe and went below the knees.

Does anyone know how to gird their loins? Here is a primer. It comes from a website called The Art of Manliness:

How to Gird Up Your Loins



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Girding your loins comes from the Passover Story in Exodus 12:11. God tells the Hebrews slaves to eat the Passover meal with their loins girded, sandals on their feet and a staff in their hand. They are to eat hurriedly, ready for travel at a moment's notice.

Lamps in those days were more like torches—they were poles with a container at the top that holds rags that can be lit. The rags will only burn for a little while unless they are dipped and re-dipped in olive oil.

Jesus uses the image of slaves who waiting up late at night for their master to return from a wedding feast. They will be awake to answer the knock at midnight. Jesus pronounces a blessing on them: "Blessed [are] those slaves whom the master finds awake when he returns."

The Greek word for stay awake is closely related to the word for resurrection. The root meaning of both words is to stand up, arise, get out of your bed. It is new life to be roused from your sleep.

Luke emphasizes the need to stay awake by telling a parable about a thief breaking into a house at night. He is probably not using the thief as a symbol of Jesus. The point is the uncertainty of knowing when a thief will break in. You must be prepared for the thief at all times.

Luke doesn't know when Jesus will return. What he does know is what we are supposed to be doing in the meantime, the acts of charity, forgiveness and peace that mark people of the kingdom.

Third Move: Growing in Discipleship

We stay awake by doing the things of the kingdom. We act with urgency, as if the kingdom is coming tonight.

It is not busy work to keep our minds off the uncertainty of life. It is reorienting ourselves to live now as if the kingdom is already present.

The kingdom is a new way of living in the world. We wake up from sleepwalking through life and do things that matter. We show people that we hadn't noticed before that they matter. We take part in a community that matters.

We are not just members of a church, we are Disciples of Christ. We live in to that identity. We grow in discipleship. As we walk with other disciples on the same journey, we grow as a church.

I hope that our Wednesday night discussions on *Disciples* will help us build an identity as Disciples already living in the kingdom. I will give you a teaser of our next discussion.

We live in an individualistic culture that exalts freedom at the expense of community. Surveys of attitudes of members in mainline churches show that they reflect the individualism of the culture. Gary Dorrien, a scholar of theological ethics, says:

These studies repeatedly show that mainline churchgoers generally lack a deep or coherent faith, expect to be catered to, do not expect to be asked to do much [beyond giving money],

feel little commitment to each other as participants in something greater than themselves, and consider social mission activities to be optional.

No wonder our churches are declining! Churchgoers are not growing in discipleship.

Michael Kinnamon and Jan Linn shamefully admit that this sounds like a lot of Disciples churches. They believe that Disciples churches have not done a good job of teaching about the responsibilities that come with baptism. Biblical literacy is not optional, especially in a tradition such as ours that has disavowed creeds and teaching from the magisterium.

Those responsibilities are part of a covenant. God covenanted with the people of Israel, “I will be your God, and you will be my people.” A covenant is an enduring relationship. When we are in covenant, we remain in relationship, no matter what. When we are baptized, we become part of a covenant people. We have rights and responsibilities toward each other and toward God and Christ. The Identity Statement for the Disciples of Christ says, “We welcome all to the Lord’s Table, as God has welcomed us.”

When we confess that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God, that affects the way we live. We confess that we will follow Jesus and that we will walk in faith with other followers of Christ.

What if we asked each member of our congregation to enter into a covenant? Something like this:

I covenant with Edmond Trinity Christian Church and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) to become an active part of the worship, study, community life, and service of this congregation. I strive to grow in my discipleship, offering my God-given time, talent and resources to God’s glory and the mission of the church.

What if every January when we install church officers during worship, we asked each member to reaffirm this covenant? What if we asked during Joys and Concerns to reflect on how you have grown spiritually in the last year, on how you have contributed to building up the community, on how

you have demonstrated love of neighbor? Shouldn't we have public expectations for our life together as Disciples?

Many congregations [not ours] have annual reviews of their ministers and staff to evaluate how the ministers are living up to their commitments. What if the elders each year reflected on how the congregation is living up to its covenantal promises? What is the congregation doing in mission? What is the congregation doing to take part in the life of the regional church and the national church? What if we had an annual retreat in which the elders identified spiritual practices for the congregation to take part in during the coming year?

Becoming disciples in a covenant community that reflects the values of the kingdom of God requires spiritual maturity. We have to be intentional about it.

Kinnamon and Dorrien lament that if we don't act as a covenantal people, we are clubs of individuals who are formed by the culture. We become useless in the divine struggle against principalities and powers because we are part of them.

Conclusion

Being rich toward God means living as if the kingdom is already present. It means we have an attitude of trust instead of an attitude of anxiety.

Keep your loins girded and your lamps burning. We have work to do.

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