

Luke 12:32-40

³² “Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. ³³ Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. ³⁴ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Watchfulness

³⁵ “Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning, ³⁶ like servants waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, so that when he comes and knocks they can immediately open the door for him. ³⁷ It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes. Truly I tell you, he will dress himself to serve, will have them recline at the table and will come and wait on them. ³⁸ It will be good for those servants whose master finds them ready, even if he comes in the middle of the night or toward daybreak. ³⁹ But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁰ You also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.”

There were two men in an insane asylum, and they decided they didn't want to be there anymore, so they were going to escape. So they figure out that from the corner of the roof of this one particular two-story building in the complex, they can jump down across the fence to freedom. So that night they sneak up to the roof and the first man psychs himself up, and he jumps from the roof and lands on the other side of the fence. He looks back up to his friend, who is peering over the edge, and he says “I can't do it! I'm afraid of heights and I just can't bring myself to jump off this building!”

On the ground, the first man is thinking how to coax him down, and he realizes that if he'd just take a step off the building, he'd probably fall right over the fence. So he calls up to the roof “Hey, it's okay. I've got a flashlight with me. I'm going to shine the light right up to the corner of the building, and I want you to walk across the beam right to me.”

The man on the roof calls back “What do you think I am, crazy? I know you! You'd turn off the light when I was half way across!”

Fear. Fear is this stupid kind of feeling. It serves a purpose, but just not in and of itself. At Youth World, the organization I worked for in Ecuador, and with which our high schoolers

served this summer, we tell short-term teams about the uselessness of guilt. How guilt can be a natural reaction to witnessing the injustices that come about because of poverty, but how it doesn't do any good by itself. If all you do is see someone in poverty and feel guilty about what you have, you're just going to feel bad. It's when guilt spurs us to action, when we move beyond just feeling an emotion to reacting in a tangible way that fruit can come about. It's the same way with fear.

I know a lot of people who are afraid of snakes. That's probably something that's pretty natural too, something that's built into us because plenty of snakes out there can do some damage to us poor people. And while I'm not absolutely terrified of them, I have a healthy respect for them, based on a couple of memorable experiences with slithering things in my own life.

There's a photo of me from the first summer I worked the Quito Quest program in Ecuador. We're at a zoo in the small jungle city of Tena, and the zookeeper let us get the snakes out of their glass case and play with them a little bit. In this photo, I've got a snake draped around my neck as it's sliding from my shoulders to another team member. And my grandpa saw this photo and every time I'd talk to him he'd say "You were laughing in that picture... was that a real snake? ...Really? It was *real*?" Because my grandpa was terrified of snakes.

Now while that thing was on me, I did think to myself a few times, "Better not make any sudden movements. I don't want to tick him off. He could deal with me a *lot* faster than I could deal with him." He could do some damage if he wanted to.

Like I said, I'm not terrified of snakes, but I do remember one summer when I was an elementary schooler and jumping into the pool in my neighborhood in Atlanta. I'd been in there for about 15 seconds when my mom started screaming "Danny! Get out of the pool!" And something in her voice made me swim for the side right then instead of arguing like I wanted to that I really had put on sunscreen and that she could stop overreacting. Well, I'm glad I heard that little bit of terror, because as it turned out I was the first one to disturb the water that morning, and there was a water moccasin in the pool, who decided he wanted a piece of me for disturbing his sunny nap on the tiles with my cannonball into the pool.

If either my mom or I had just stopped in fear in the path of the snake, it wouldn't have ended as pleasantly for me that morning. Which brings me back around to the point: snakes don't scare me *any more than they should*. I said it about guilt, and I told you it applies the same way here: fear doesn't do us any good until we get *past* it.

That's what Jesus is doing here in the twelfth chapter of Luke. He says "Do not be **afraid**, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom." But what's he talking about? Snakes? Heights? Clowns? Spiders? Deep water? Phil Douce? Slenderman? Any of the little things that we are afraid of? Nope. He's not really talking about any of these things, he's talking about the way we let any kind of fear get in the way of us and God. Because he goes right on to talk about things. Possessions. *Stuff*.

If that sounds familiar, it's because Jesus literally says this in the same breath as last week's verses. He's still directing this statement to the man complaining about being unhappy with his fair share of an inheritance. What does fear have to do with that? Well, pretty much everything. We were told last week, and we're told today that we should be rich toward God, and to sell our possessions and instead store up treasures in heaven. Godly treasures that can't be stolen by a thief or destroyed by the moths. Because as we collect all of our stuff, and we fill our bigger and bigger houses with more stuff as Joe was talking about last Sunday, what do we do as we become attached to it? We worry. We worry about the thieves and the moths. We spend time on that useless emotion of fear. So Jesus is urging us past that, past our fear to focus on the Father. **(8 min)**

A couple of great Psalmists put it very simply. The Psalmist David said in the second half of Psalm 37:8 "...do not fret—it leads only to evil." And the other great Psalmist, Yoda, said, "Fear is the path to the dark side. Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate... leads to suffering."

I've got one more fear story. A couple of summers ago I had a roommate in Ecuador named Scotty. He was the kind of guy you both loved to be around and couldn't stand to be around because he was good at *everything*. He was hilarious, he could skate, he could kick my butt in soccer and in Spanish, and everybody loved him except the staff member who'd had to clean out an apartment before him the summer before.

But the thing that really made him seem just one notch above the rest of us was that he was completely confident in himself in any situation, without coming off as arrogant. And I saw that in him in this incredible way on a night that I really should have been afraid. The two of us were going to meet the girls up at the movie theatre to watch the 7:00 movie, which was *Toy Story 3* (because that's what 25-year-old missionaries do in their free time: they watch Pixar movies). Now Scotty and I lived in a house that was up the hill a ways, and to get to it, you'd take this main road for a while, and then go down a side street, and then, turn back down the hill

down a second side street a little ways. So it really wasn't that complicated, just a couple of right turns from this well-known street, but still, *no* taxi driver in the city could ever find it from directions over the phone. So we called a taxi, and they told us "no tenemos taxis en su barrio ahorita," which was really a lie and they just didn't want to look for us on a map. So instead of spending 20 minutes calling every taxi service for miles around hoping we'd just get lucky, we gave up and started walking.

It's not far at all to the movie theatre, and we were in a pretty wealthy, safe neighborhood heading to the most North American looking shopping center anywhere around, so we both just felt like we were at home, and neither of us stopped to think about the fact that we were breaking a big rule, that nobody was supposed to walk anywhere after dark. Now it wasn't even that dark yet when we left, which is probably another reason we didn't really stop to think, but being in a valley on the equator, the sun goes down behind those volcanoes *really* quickly. So there we are right across from the movie theatre, waiting for the light to change so we can cross the street, when two guys walk up behind us.

Scotty was closer to them, so the guy in front comes right up to him, with his hands in the front pocket of his hoodie, and he says to Scott in Spanish "I have a gun. I don't want to shoot you... give me all your money." And Scott, calm as can be, looks him in the eye, waits about a three-count, and says "...No." Confident as he always is, unafraid, and so I thought to myself, if he's going to play chicken with a guy who may or may not have a gun, I guess I will too. So I pulled out my old clunky Nokia "brick" cell phone and started playing Snake as if these two guys weren't even there. And Scotty and the would-be mugger just continued their staring contest.

I really don't know if this lasted for seconds or minutes, but about the time I thought "this has gotten so awkward, something is going to happen... one of them is going to blink..." a Police pickup truck pulled up at the light and three National Police officers and a civilian spring out of the cab, and the civilian points to the two guys and yells to the cops in Spanish "That's them, those are the guys who robbed me!" Apparently he'd gone to report them for mugging him farther down the same street, because the cops grabbed these guys by their hoodies, slammed them over the bed of the pickup truck and arrested them right there. Scott and one of the officers stared at each other for a second... and right as the traffic light changed, and before the cop could decide he needed to take statements from the two gringos I said "Scott, we're going. Now." And we walked across the street and watched the movie and told the girls what happened and got a lot of attention from all the female interns for about three days.

That confidence that Scotty exuded rubbed off on me in that situation, in my decision-making and in my lack of fear. Because if I'd been in that situation by myself, I would have started screaming like a little girl, thrown my wallet at them and run into the traffic. But I had somebody with me. I wish I could say that I was relying on God in that moment, because that's the point I'm trying to make with this story. He doesn't necessarily reveal himself in as tangible a way as having Scott standing right next to me, but he's there in those situations and knowing that should remind us how silly it is to fear.

I'm always amazed at how the lectionary readings fit together each week, once you dig into them. You know, several scriptures that can be very dissimilar at first glance. I look at this part of Luke talking about fear and I think back to the chapter from Isaiah that was read earlier in the service, where God, through the prophet, is blasting his own people and how tired he is of them only offering him *stuff*. He says "I have had more than enough of burnt offerings... fat... blood... feasts... [t]hey have become a burden to me." He tells his people to make themselves clean and do right, seek justice, and defend the oppressed as offerings instead of all the things they've been trying to give him. I mean, coming from God himself, that ought to make you say "Oh, okay, I've been kinda screwing up this worship thing."

The Reverend Dawn Chesser, writing for the Global Board of Discipleship, put those verses from Isaiah into modern language like this:

"Hear the Word of the Lord, United Methodists from the southeastern jurisdiction to the northwestern jurisdiction and all points in between; and from the far reaches of New England to the desert southwest! Listen to the teaching of the Lord from the Carolinas to California! I have had enough of your worship, traditional and contemporary, blended, emergent, and multicultural! I have grown to despise your empty offerings and your meaningless rituals! Why do you pray to me when you've got blood on your hands? Get right with each other first, and wash yourselves clean before you come before me again!"

That is pretty harsh. Because it's pretty close to home. How much do we get caught up in this stuff, just like she's saying? I go to the traditional service. Or I like contemporary praise music. We are part of an emergent church, or a multicultural congregation. I know what the liturgical colors are for today. I know exactly where God wants the brass candlesticks to be placed. And in each of these things we're saying "I know the right way to worship." I told you that Scott was a great guy because he could be confident without being arrogant. Well if we're

confident in the box that we put God into instead of just being confident in God, how arrogant is that? And I say "we" and I mean "me too." I mean "Danny Peck."

One other thing we ask our short-term teams in Ecuador to do is to die to their spiritual prejudice. And more than anything I struggle with coming off a mission of any length with Youth World, that's where I have trouble. I'll think "I know how to worship better than any of these silly people around me. I can worship at 201 S Road Street and I can worship in a covered court in the jungle, so I must have it right." If we think we know *the "right"* way to worship God, as my friend Cameron puts it, we're saying "I know how *God* wants to be worshipped."

I know how God wants to be worshipped? Which kind of music and paraments and lighting and architecture He likes? Yeah, right. Didn't He just spend twelve verses tearing the Isrealites a new one even as they (at least thought they) were following His own instructions? They had to get past that. The instructions were only as good as guilt. Only as good as fear. They had to get past them to worship God with their lives, with their actions toward others, with their hearts.

In a minute we're getting ready to sing "I Will Celebrate." Billy didn't have a clue what I was talking about when he picked that out, but as he'll tell you, Jesus spoke to him on Monday morning, because the chorus to this song is a great example. It says "With my heart, rejoicing within" ('Cause that's where we start, not with the bulletin, not with an order of service, but in our hearts) "With my mind focused on Him" (not the candlesticks, not the organ) "With my hands raised to the heavens." "With my hands raised to the heavens." I can't tell you the last time I stood in a Methodist worship service and put my hands up while I was singing, mostly because I was thinking "the people in the row behind me are gonna think I'm stupid or Baptist or both." My heart and my mind clearly aren't focused on Him like the song says if that's where my brain is, huh?

Get past the fear. Get past the way it gets in the way. And whatever this means for you, replace it with worship.

Amen.