

"Going Up, Up, Up"
Sermon on Sunday, August 7, 2022

Dear church,

"Do not be afraid, little flock," says Jesus. "Your father has been pleased to give you the kingdom." Those are comforting words but also words we may not be entirely ready for. There is so much to worry about in this world, reasons to be frightened, are there not? Covid is still around and to some extent dictating what we can do; we are constantly evaluating risk and reward. Will it ever be over or at least under control? For our friends in Ukraine it must be much, much worse; every day is a challenge; every day they could hear news from family members who died defending their country or civilians who were hit by a rocket. And there is, hanging over all of us a layer of apocalyptic fog that has been blanketing the entire planet it seems. Global news simply isn't good these days, no matter where you look. We are well advised to listen to Jesus, who was always clear-eyed about the future of his people and never shied away from telling them the truth, including the persecutions and tribulations that he saw in their future. And yet, a big YET, he also said to them, "Do not be afraid little flock."

How could Christ be so confident, so positive, and so full of trust? Most of us have a hard time staying positive at the current time. What was his secret? Let me compare his approach to something I don't know much about, just enough to draw a comparison. Let me compare it to a hot air balloon. That may seem like a strange comparison, but balloons basically rise because of two things. Number One: the gas in the balloon is lighter than the air and wants to go up. And number two: the people who board the balloon will get rid of the weights which hold them down. In much the same way, Jesus teaches us to rise as people of faith. The equivalent of the gas in the balloon is the Holy Spirit: always rising, always giving us hope, pulling us out of the dumpsters of life, pulling us up toward heaven. And the weights that hold us down are for the most part the things we only think we need, things that may give us a sense of security but often end up holding us captive. That's why Jesus follows up his opening message "Do not be afraid" with "Sell your possessions

and give it to the poor.” In other words: get rid of your weights. A good question for us to ask is: what weighs us down? Is it something we really need?

There are other forms of weight which have us stuck. It’s not all about material things. The deep worries of our hearts, which become so heavy that they pull us down even when the spirit wants to lift us up... You probably have a few of those weights in your life, as do I. And so, to continue in my metaphor, Jesus asks: are you ready to go on this balloon ride called “faith,” ready to dump more of those weights, to get off the ground? Much of what Jesus taught his disciples was not about gaining something but the opposite: letting go, dropping weights, giving the spirit license to lift us up. Much of the gospel is addition by subtraction!

At almost every opportunity during his three wandering years, Jesus taught his followers to stay nimble, pack lightly on their journeys and soar above their worries and life’s difficulties. Two millennia later, with new problems and new worries that want to latch onto us at every turn, we can still learn from that. Nothing that happens on this earth is out of the reach of God’s love and God’s grace. Nothing is important enough to be in the way of God’s energy in your life. Even if we must let possessions or worries go... Do not be afraid, little flock!

One passage in today’s gospel caught my special attention because I don’t believe I noticed the subversive power of this statement ever before, to be perfectly honest. In verse 37, where Jesus compares the kingdom of God to servants preparing for their master to come home from an important celebration, he almost casually mentions something that turns the tables and contradicts how society is supposed to work. He said, “It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes. Truly, I tell you, he (the master) will dress himself to serve, will have them recline at the table and will come and wait on them.” Did we get the full meaning of this? What he describes here was pretty unthinkable in the Roman society of the time, a master serving his slaves. It was totally unthinkable in the slave economy that dominated the American

South for almost 200 years; and it still runs counter to the main currents of society today. Jesus says, "When we are ready to serve God, God will be ever so happy to serve us!"

That's why a true church can't be self-serving but must serve God and others or it will die. That's why recovery programs, such as AA, pretty quickly discovered that part of their salvation, part of the recovery process, consists in serving others. That's why, when we give, we always receive more. That's also why, when we serve, we tend to be less pre-occupied with the weights in our own life and all of a sudden – the balloon soars!!! Also, all of a sudden we can receive more easily the words that we heard at the beginning of today's gospel lesson: "Do not be afraid little flock. Your father has been pleased to give you the kingdom." Serving, we are on our way up to be served by God!

Amen.