

Fear Not, Little Flock

October 4, 2026 + World Communion Sunday + Luke 12: 32-35 +
+ St. James United Church, Woodstock NB + The Rev. Rob Shearer

Years ago, I encountered a small group of Christians who lived together, practiced hospitality – offering a room or meal to those in need - and who had a common bank account for their shared household needs.

I was stunned to learn from them that, after paying their monthly bills, if they had any money left in their shared account at the end of any given month, that as an act of radical trust in God, they would give any leftover funds away to those in need.

Now, I don't know about you, but that's a kind of trust that feels more than just a teensy bit beyond my own comfort level. *[pause]*

The United Church has designated these next five weeks as a “Season of Gratitude” – inviting us to reflect deeper on the many good things in our lives and what our ‘posture’ might be around them.

This section of Luke - the middle of Luke chapter 12 - has Jesus speaking a lot about money and possessions – topics, which (along with sex, of course) are some of the very things that we, as Church, are pretty reluctant to talk about on Sunday mornings.

In an early part of Luke 12 – just a few verses back - a person in a crowd asks Jesus to tell their brother to divide up their inheritance with them. Jesus' response is not to give a directive one way or another – but, instead - to look into that person in the crowd's intention and to encourage him to be aware of all kinds of greed - while reminding him that life does not consist of an abundance of possessions.

Jesus riffs on from there to tell one of his famous short stories, a parable – this one of a rich person whose land produces a vast abundance - and who wants to know what to do with the excess. Again, Jesus skips answering the question – and God warns the rich person that their life is short, as if to suggest, as my own mama used to say - ‘you can't take it with you’. Jesus' punchline: “don't store up treasures. Instead – be rich toward God.”

Then Jesus turns back to disciples, his inner circle, and encourages them: “Do not worry” Don't worry - Jesus says – about your life, or what you'll eat, about your body, or your clothes.” Jesus then turns their gaze to the natural world and encourages the disciples: “Consider the ravens – God feeds them. Consider the lilies – how they don't toil but are so strikingly beautiful.”

The Greek word translated as “consider” - κατανοέω (kat-an-o-eh'-o) – consider the lilies and ravens - is not soft or passive– it means to consider *attentively*, fix one's *whole* eyes or mind upon a thing. And this punchline this time: “Don't be anxious. Seek first God's reign – everything else falls into place.”

Which gets us to today's reading which continues with Jesus' teaching. “Do not be afraid” Jesus says – Do not be afraid. These are words we hear earlier in Luke's gospel - spoken to Zachariah, to Mary, to the Shepherds, to Simon Peter as he was called out to fish for people, to Jairus whose daughter was dying. Do not be afraid – that phrase which appears some 70 times throughout scripture.

“Do not be afraid”, he tells them – followed up by this sweet, affectionate term, “little flock”. Do not be afraid dear little flock, for it is God's good pleasure, God has chosen gladly - as one translation puts it. God has made a *delightful decision*, in other. The Greek word for God's choice is, notably, in the past tense - εὐδόκησεν (yoo-dok-eh'-o). As if to say, God has already joyfully chosen to give you God's Reign.

Then, Jesus gets all radical on us. “Sell your possessions and give alms”, Jesus says – echoing the earlier story of the rich man - as well as the testimony of the earliest Christians in Acts 2 who sold all they had and gave the excess away to the poor.

For me, alms sometimes feels like a stale, medieval sounding word that we don't use so often anymore. I think of “alms boxes” that I've seen at the back of some older churches, often wondering what the word “alms” exactly means. The Greek word for alms - ἐλεημοσύνη (el-eh-ay-mos-oo'-nay) is translated literally as ‘compassion’ or ‘mercy’. Sell what you have and give compassion, live mercy.

I think that sometimes we tend to read this passage backwards. I, for one, often read it as if to say, If we give alms, well, then we'll get the prize. That is - it's all on us. But Jesus, again in the past tense, says that God has already given the Kingdom, the Reign - to us – meaning that the alms – the compassion, the mercy – this is merely a response to God's gift – not a condition to receive it.

There's a word here, I believe, for us as individuals and family units, yes. But also as the local Beloved Community of Jesus, for St. James United Church in Woodstock New Brunswick on this very Sunday.

So, dear St, James – there are challenges, yes. Yes, there are times to cry out and say “precious Lord, take my hand”. And part of the beauty is that, in this, you don't need to worry or be anxious – for God's reign of Shalom is already yours, it's ours! All we can do is surrender the fear, surrender what you have - and simply respond to God's grace as you live into compassion and mercy.

In Jesus' incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection, we hold a bigger story than one which has the purpose of life as to build up our storehouses. It's a reminder that

God's ecology, God's reign, the story of Jesus is bigger than the story of the market, of the news cycle, what I will eat or drink, our body issues, our health, our bank accounts. It's bigger than the story of the church budget, or attendance or who is or isn't attending.

For the simple truth is that God's reign is present - it is here - it has already been given to us - you and I don't need to build it from scratch. There is nothing you can do to earn the beautiful shalom of God. It's God's sheer delight (as the text says) to have already given it to you.

Friends in that sure knowledge, we can reflect God's mercy and compassion - to give alms - to those around us - not as some key to heaven, but as a here-and-now response to what God has offered to us in Christ Jesus.

This is a beautiful invitation to a response rooted a life of compassion - the word literally means to suffer-with-the-other. A second response, I would suggest, based on the words of Psalm 104, echoed in our call to worship today, is to recognize the abundance all around - and live into it with praise to the very Source, Redeemer and Sustainer of all things!

So look, I'm not necessarily suggesting that you or I, or your household or this community of faith need to be like that audacious group of Christians who gave away the excess in their bank account at the end of each month.

But I am suggesting that, in this season of gratitude, there is a deep freedom in the non-attachment to stuff, to outcomes, to the worry of focusing on bank accounts and buildings and budgets and possessions.

And so, beautiful community, I leave you with Jesus' words - fear not. Fear not - for in Jesus, the very Reign of shalom - of peace - where everyone has enough and lives without fear - it has, indeed, come.

And in this, we have freedom to reflect Jesus' mercy and compassion to the world God loves and came to redeem - and to respond with unceasing, grateful praise.

This, friends, is a story that we can trust. Amen.