

12th Sunday after Pentecost
Year C - 7/8/2016

Isaiah 1:1,10-20
Psalm 50:1-8,23-24
Hebrews 11:1-3,8-16
Luke 12:32-40

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

What does God desire? What does God desire?

My first answer to that question would be simple and obvious - I would take the words of Micah, that great prophet, who just said this - "I desire mercy, not sacrifice, says the Lord."

Of course, this is as deeply challenging as it is apparently simple - what does it mean, in today's world of globalization and pluralism, and amidst a gap between rich and poor that has never been greater, what does it mean to truly show mercy?

Today, Jesus offers a different glimpse into this question - a different way to approach our thinking. "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." (Lk.12:32) There it is, in a nutshell. No matter how complex and difficult we might try and make it all be sometimes, God's desire is that we should have nothing less than the kingdom. And that we should not be afraid.

Simple? Well, no, actually. Not at all.

After all, we're taught from an early age to save, to prepare for the future financially, just as the farmer deemed to be so foolish by Jesus was doing last week. So Jesus' words are counter-cultural, as is what follows this week:

“Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Is *this* what being prepared looks like? Selling everything and giving alms? For most of us, that message is a non-starter. I wonder, though, if we might approach this as a matter of priorities. Our culture encourages us to accumulate material treasures and wealth - it's our duty even, we're told, to support the economy. And not to do so would likely mean putting our families at risk.

Having too much, on the other hand, can also put us at risk - at risk of becoming so self-centered that we lose sight of what really matters - our families, our friends, and most of all, the life Jesus calls us to. How do we as individuals and as congregations set our priorities, keeping our eyes fixed on God's abundance and God's kingdom? How do we use our treasure to help God's kingdom become a reality? How do we make sure our hearts are in the right place?

The passage from Isaiah provides another way to approach priorities. Isaiah proclaims God's disgust at Israel's worship rituals and practices - things central to their relationship with God, and sanctioned by Torah. Listening carefully to Isaiah, however, it becomes clear that what God is objecting to most is the failure of the people to oppose injustice, to live ethically. Worship that is not accompanied by a changed life becomes not just meaningless but abhorrent.

Is this a danger for us? No matter how good our liturgy, how excellent our worship, if we prioritize that over living transformed lives, does our worship also become abhorrent to God? We often see worship as central to our lives - and it is - but is it enough? I saw an interesting post on Facebook the other day - it said this “God isn't interested in the number of people who come to your church - he's only interested in the number that come to church and have their lives transformed by it...” You get the point, anyway - unless our worship touches us, changes us, it is like the sort of worship that is condemned by Isaiah today.

So neither Isaiah nor Jesus is straightforward in what they are saying. Isaiah is not saying - “don’t worship God”, any more than Jesus is saying “just follow your heart!!”

Jesus is not making a moral point here - he is appealing to the imagination, attempting to help us see what is God’s desire for us - that we might understand where our *first* intentions and priorities should be. Get that right, Jesus says, and everything else, including all of our legitimate concerns, will fall into place.

The mainspring of it all is Jesus’ passionate conviction concerning the riches available to humans if only they will truly open up their lives to relationship with God. It is the Father’s good pleasure (in fact, Brendan Byrne believes it is better rendered as God’s *determination*) to give you the kingdom. God is determined that we should have the kingdom.

In the context of that divine generosity all else pales into insignificance. It then makes really good sense to sell one’s possessions, for you are not really losing anything. Rather, you are investing in a supremely secure heavenly future which God has guaranteed. And if our treasure is there, so will our heart be, also.

In fact, that last statement might make more sense the other way around. The idea seems to be that if the heart, the inner core of a person that determines attitudes and actions, is anchored on God, then everything we say or do reflects the sense of security flowing from this relationship. Such people, free from obsessive self-concern, themselves become agents of the hospitality of God.

And so anchored by the promise that God wants to give us all good things, we can hear these commands and injunctions differently. God wants us not to be beset by worries, to keep our priorities straight, to not be consumed by greed or love of those things that do not bring real happiness. Rather, God wants us to have and enjoy and share the abundant life that comes from authentic community and right relationship with God and each other.

That's not the end of the story, however - and it would be wrong to ignore or avoid the second part of the passage - for here, too, we see something of what God desires. God desires that we remain alert; watchful; faithful, in our lives.

So when it comes to being on the lookout for the coming kingdom, Jesus doesn't want us to miss when God comes in ways that might surprise us -- in generosity instead of accumulation, in community instead of looking out for ourselves, in vulnerability and relationship rather than in strength. It's easy to miss the God who comes in love and grace, you see, when all we expect is law and punishment.

God's desire, it seems, is nothing less than for us to have everything - everything we *need*, rather than everything we *want*.

Let us pray...

Lord God,
you make the minds of the faithful
to be of one will.
Lead us to love what you command
and desire what you promise,
so that, among the changes of this world,
our hearts may there be fixed where true joys are found.
We ask this through your Son,
Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns
with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever.

Amen