

When there's a sudden power failure and we are plunged into darkness, I usually end up wandering around the house asking, "Now where did I put that flashlight? Oh, and I wonder if the batteries are still good? And where are the candles and matches?" Too often, I'm caught unprepared. Planning for disasters is always on my to-do list – usually at the bottom. As Mark Twain said, "Never put off until tomorrow what you can do the day AFTER tomorrow." I get that! But Benjamin Franklin warned, "You may delay, but time will not."

In today's gospel, Jesus warns us about the need to be prepared for the most important event of all time – the master's sudden return. "The Son of Man will come when you least expect him." Let's take a look at the text.

First, it's always fascinating to me how much Jesus talks about money and stuff. People try to make the gospel some other-worldly, spiritual, ethereal kind of thing. It's not. The gospel is very down to earth with ramifications for every aspect of our lives – including politics and the way we handle money. Where anyone ever got the idea that the gospel has nothing to say about the most basic pieces of our lives -- how we order our society and how we run it economically -- is just astounding. It just doesn't square with the New Testament – or the Old Testament prophets. Franciscan Richard Rohr wrote this: "When we talk about religion as a lifestyle or a way of behaving and engaging in the world, we are not just talking about religion as a mere belief system. We must be honest here: a belief system asks almost nothing of us – in terms of loving the poor, in stretching our hearts to include people who are not from our country or group. It asks nothing from our pocketbook or from our social calendar. We can live 24-7 taking care of ourselves, while still saying we believe. It is amazing and sad that the idea of Christianity as a mere belief system instead of a lifestyle has lasted so long...." (posting from UNITIVE CONSCIOUSNESS, August 6, 2010) Jesus always talked in the concrete; He was not otherworldly in His speech. His homiletic rubber met the dusty Palestinian roads.

In her commentary on Luke's gospel, Sharon Ringe emphasizes Luke's pastoral and prophetic concern for the poor and the marginalized. Like the Old Testament prophets, Luke attributed their plight to an economic system that unfairly privileged some, exploited many, while incentivizing greed and corruption. Sound familiar? The system was reinforced by an ideology that called it 'good' and imputed shame and failure on those it deemed losers or unfortunates. Against this established system of an economics of ruthless competition, privilege, and excess profit for some leading to scarcity for many, Luke's Jesus sought to advance a 'Jubilee' economics of compassion, justice, and abundant life for all (4:14-19). The urgency for the church to embrace such a vision in Luke's time could hardly be more compelling than the urgency for us today in the face of global economic vulnerability, growing inequality, and environmental degradation. These are gospel issues; they are not optional for a person who wishes to claim to be a disciple of Christ.

In this light there are 3 potential audiences for which this text was and is now most relevant. They have been called '*the anxious have-nots*,' '*the anxious haves*,' and '*the confident haves*.'

The anxious have-nots are those who deal daily with the real consequences of economic neglect and injustice. For them the issues of what to eat, what to wear, where to find jobs, and how to get health care are concrete and pressing problems. I doubt this text was directed toward them. To warn such persons that worry is bad for their souls would have been beyond insensitive. Rather, Jesus' response to the *anxious have-nots*

tended to be more active and pastoral -- involving concrete gestures of hospitality, blessing, healing and defending. As St. Francis observed, Jesus preached to the poor ALWAYS – but only now and then with words.

The *confident haves*, on the other hand, were certainly part of Luke's intended audience. The parable of the foolish rich man was in keeping with Jesus' stance of dire warning to those who were a danger to themselves and others precisely because of their LACK of anxiety about their impact on others and the economic/ecological environment even THEY are ultimately dependent upon. Stories abound of the appalling arrogance and greed of business elites who played a large role in various economic crises, only to profit from the mess they had created. For such as these Jesus reserved His harshest prediction: "Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation." (6:24)

Yet I suspect it was the *anxious haves* for which most of Luke's sermon was intended. These are people who have enough *for now* but still act deeply insecure. In good or boom-times they often have MORE than enough. Then they are at risk of becoming 'aspirational buyers' chasing the life-style of the 'confident haves,' or the rich and famous. Seduced by the ideology that more is better and even that 'greed is good' they are tempted to waste their wealth on things that corrupt more than enrich them in the end.

In hard times, *anxious haves* are tempted to waste their energies in escapism, worrying, or looking for people to blame for their situation. Sadly, by some twisted logic, they are more likely to scapegoat the *anxious have-nots* than blame the *confident haves* and the unfair system that rewards them. We have seen that play out over and over again in history.

So Luke's message to the *anxious haves*, which is most of us, is simple and profound: channel the energy of anxiety in a more constructive direction. Look where the roots of our insecurity REALLY lie. Instead of seeking security where it cannot be found – strive for the Kingdom of God; strive for a more just economy, for a politics of compassion and inclusion, and for deeper concern and commitment for the environment.

In precarious times, we, the *anxious haves*, are tempted to resist anxiety in unhealthy ways: denying, blaming, worrying, wishful thinking, or 'circling the wagons' against outsiders. (all of this adapted from Wally Fletcher, in LECTONARY HOMILETICS, Aug-Sept 2010, p. 15) No we don't need to feel ashamed, because that will get us nowhere -- and we are all in this together; we all like stuff and we all like to be comfortable and secure. But we can certainly see that there is a larger perspective that the gospel offers to us, and that we might be able to see all of this in larger terms than our bank accounts, investments, and possessions – and as bigger than just us.

I remember at one point a parishioner told me that they had been away for the weekend, and came back to their house broken into and pillaged. Most of their valuables were gone. But as she walked through the disheveled house with the police, she said that she kept hearing the voice that she had heard so often in the gospels: "It's all stuff, it's all stuff." She was a very mature person. Any of us who have ever been robbed know what a devastating and miserable experience it is. But I am reminded of the story of the holy man who was told by his disciple that the disciple's house had just burned down. The holy man said, "This will make it easier for you to die." Therein lies the wisdom.

So what's the remedy? How do we learn to LIVE this gospel message?

For centuries, the Church has had one of the main movements of the Mass as a teacher for us in this. At the Offertory, or Preparation of the Gifts, people bring forth the fruits of our everyday labor and place them at the altar in a procession. At one time these gifts were things like a chicken or eggs, wood for the fire or for

repairs or for building, produce, bread, etc. Now we mostly give by check, cash or bank withdrawal. But the giving, the oblation, is one of the movements of a life of faith, and of the celebration of the Mass.

We live in a culture with a deep ambiguity in regard to the material stuff of life. Some of us are paying too high a price for our accumulation of things. Some of us are neglecting our health, neglecting our families and friends, because we are working ourselves to death. We are spending too much time at the office, giving too much to our labor, thinking that we are going to get a worthwhile return. What are we to do about this over-striving, and over-work, and over-accumulation?

The church says that we need to bring it to the altar. We can take this deeply ambiguous money – the source of so much good – and so much evil – and put it on the altar. In so doing, our daily work is redeemed. What we are doing, in offering, is transformed from the mere making of a living to the living of a life. Whatever we do for a living, we now do to the glory of God and for the giving to others. We can put it all on the altar, including our imperfect and ambiguous ways of dealing with all of this.

When we do this, we see us at our best. We take the stuff of our daily lives, and we give it back to God, for God's work. Will Willimon writes: "What is the most significant, countercultural revealing act of worship on Sunday? What act of worship typifies the wonder of the Christian faith? Is it the sermon preached? I wish. Is it the Eucharist when we receive Christ's body and blood? Or is the reading of Scripture when we submit ourselves to God's?

I believe in our culture it is the offering. There we take a stand. There we show where our values are. There we swear allegiance. There we put our beliefs into action. The offering may be that act that makes all other acts of worship possible." (PULPIT RESOURCE, July-Sept 2010, p. 28)

Thanks for struggling through this with me. I know this is not an easy gospel to hear – it's not an easy gospel to preach.

When we deal with stuff, in many ways the gospel's whole attitude is to remind us that it is all temporary, no matter how valuable and precious and permanent it may look to us. And all of life's losses – both little and big, surrenders and deaths, are just preparation for the final, great surrender in death itself, when we all hope to pray with our last breath, the same words as Jesus: "Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit." Amen.