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Church of the Holy Faith
Ninth Sunday Pentecost
Proper 14
Gen 15:1-6; Ps 33:12-22; Hebrews 11:1-3; 8-16
Luke 12:32-40
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Your Father's Good Pleasure

I am not a gardener. I am not good with plants. I love flowers and gardens and well-landscaped yards, but it's just not my gift. When I was ordained, my daughter sent me a plant, explaining that it was symbolic of "helping people grow in faith." I've been fearful ever since of killing it. Fortunately, it is still alive and actually flourishing. My husband shares the same green thumb deficit, so years ago he decided to throw a bunch of wildflower seeds in our backyard. That was it. I think the first year we actually watered them. Viola! Year after year we get an abundance of yellow, purple, red, and white flowers that magically reappear despite our inattentiveness. It is a joyful and perhaps undeserved gift.

Sometimes God graces us with the faith of a field of wildflowers, blooming uncontrollably without assistance, showy and cheerful, blessing all who come near. It is a joyful, and perhaps undeserved gift. "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen," the anonymous author of Hebrews wrote. This verse sure does sound good. It has all the right, strong words: faith, assurance, hope, conviction. What do we do, though, on those days or weeks or months when we can't muster up faith, when we have only the assurance of disappointment, and the only convictions we feel are discouragement, grief, and fear? More commonly, faith is less like a wildflower field and more like a bonsai tree that needs careful pruning, or a vegetable garden that needs weeding, watering, and a whole lot of deer fencing. Faith needs a sense of right priorities. It needs community. It needs nurturing and preparation.

In our passage from Luke's gospel, Jesus speaks to these faith-needs. The passage is a continuation from last week. Jesus is surrounded by thousands and his teachings on faith and discipleship, at first glance, seem like a random Q and A session: he talks about foolish wealthy farmers, lilies of the field, purses, thieves, and slaves waiting for a master coming home from a wedding.

This teaching, though, isn't random. Jesus knows having faith in God and being Jesus' disciple is a joy and a blessing, but he also knows it contains obstacles and struggles. He repeats multiple times: do not be worried! His words are filled with tenderness and assurance: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." Your Father's *good* pleasure. Not reluctance, but largess. It is God's good pleasure to invite us into his kingdom, a kingdom initiated by Jesus on earth. Jesus then focuses on two tools that strengthen faith and the invitation to kingdom living: prioritization and preparation.

As twenty-first century Christians living in one of the wealthiest countries in the world, I pray we don't miss Jesus' repeated admonishment to prioritize treasures "rich in God" instead of the endless consumerism our country is famous for. "Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven," could not be clearer. What is puzzling, however, is this: why is Jesus preaching the evils of empty treasures to a first century audience predominantly living hand to mouth? They don't have overstuffed garages and storage sheds filled with things. The answer: Jesus' message is broader than just getting rid of stuff we don't need. It is about priorities. When we sell possessions and give alms, we enter into a space of complete dependency on God. Our faith is placed in Christ, and we are freed from perpetual economic anxiety. The former archbishop Rowan Williams describes faith as confidence in a "dependable relationship" with God. Additionally, almsgiving is not simply a

sharing of wealth. Sharing with those who have less is an expression of true solidarity with ALL of humanity. It is a solidarity that refuses to let inequities and injustices stand. Jesus wants his followers, in their radical dependence on him, to instigate, in the words of one theologian, “a reversal of the world as it is presently known.” This is no easy task, I bet you are thinking. But guess what? *Jesus* apparently thinks it possible. “For truly I tell you,” Jesus told his disciples, “if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you.”¹ Priorities aligned with God’s priorities can strengthen faith and move mountains.

The second faith tool Jesus preaches is preparation. He uses a metaphor of slaves lighting lamps in preparation of the master’s unknown arrival time. Unlike our modern era, having light in a house in ancient Palestine involved work. Keeping lamps lit took methodical attentiveness to filling oil stock, trimming wicks, moving lamps from one place to another, and guarding against the possibility of accidental fire. “You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour,” Jesus says. Given his affectionate tone earlier in the passage, this sounds more like an invitation to relationship than a wrathful warning. Is your faith faltering? Does it need attention? What are some tangible steps you can take to bolster it? What are some tangible steps we all can take to encourage one another in faith? Like the master in the parable, Jesus may unexpectedly break into our lives. Does that possibility frighten or excite you? Are you ready? What preparations of faith are needed in your life to be receptive rather than resistant? What priorities need reordering, what calls to justice need responding to, what attentiveness to prayer, worship, and service need fine tuning? Or perhaps a major pruning?

¹ Matthew 17:20

Finally, while Jesus calls us to a resetting of priorities and diligence in preparation, faith is not an accomplishment done on our own. Faith is openness and acceptance. Faith is turning your face, like a sunflower in the sunlight, to receiving God's life-giving and empowering love. Your faith right now may be wildflower crazy, it may need some serious nurturing, or it may be somewhere in between. Wherever you are on your faith journey, let God's love be your guide. It is his *good pleasure* to give you the kingdom. Amen.