

## **Be Ready!**

Luke 12:32-39

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As I grow older, I'm realizing more and more how many crazy things my parents told my sister and me growing up. I'm not sure how they came up with all that stuff, but I have to give them credit, because it worked, at least for a while! I shared with the children's ministry team on Tuesday night that my dad told us growing up that the Bible said you have to eat hotdogs for lunch on Sunday after church. I could never find that verse, but hey, I wanted to do what the Bible said, so hotdogs we ate. Every Sunday. When my sister was quite a bit younger, before I was around, they told her that the word "exit" meant "be quiet in restaurants." All the restaurants they went to had those lit-up exit signs for emergency purposes, so they could always find one to show her, and she thought she had to be quiet. They were clever, if a little untruthful.

One of the strangest things they told us, though, was at the dinner table. We ate as a family around our little white table in the kitchen many nights, if not most, but my sister and I had some lapses in the good manners we'd been taught in etiquette class with the girl scouts or through our good southern upbringing. And when our manners declined, our parents would say, "What if the president came to dinner?"

Now to be honest, I'm not sure now what that has to do with anything, but when they said it then, I always immediately pictured Ronald Reagan standing on the back deck, about to knock on the kitchen door to join us for dinner. And somehow that made me behave better. Never did I think logically, "The chances of the president walking in during THIS DINNER are remarkably small; if the president *was* here, I'm not certain it would warrant behavior any

different than what I've been displaying; why the president? why not someone else?; and supposing the president *did* come, I could improve my manners when he arrived – no point in wasting good manners while it's just us."

But it worked. My mother would ask the question, and I would sit up straighter, take my elbows off the table, and finish my green beans without complaining. And to some extent, she was teaching me an important lesson: that practicing for the event, even if unlikely or far off, would help me be ready when the day came. And this is not dissimilar to what Jesus teaches the disciples in our Gospel text for today: "Be ready!" he says. You don't know when I'll come back, and you want to be prepared.

Now maybe you've heard this before and are starting to be a bit squirmy: I know in my experience, it's been a warning: "You better have your stuff in order in case Jesus shows up. You don't want to be caught off-guard because you'll miss out on your chance to go to heaven." Or in many cases, it's that question: "If you died tonight, do you know where you'd go?" But I'd like to suggest that we re-think the command to "be ready" a little bit. Obviously Jesus *is* referring to his return in this text, and wants the disciples – and us – to be ready. But what we are preparing for is not judgment. We don't have to be ready because otherwise we will be judged harshly and punished forever. We have to be ready to receive blessing: "It is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom," this passage begins. God, in God's love and grace, has already decided to offer us the greatest gift of all, that which will never wear out or lose its value, even in eternity. This part is done. We don't have to earn it and we aren't being warned against losing it: the kingdom is ours for receiving. But we must be ready to receive the blessing God offers.

“So,” you may ask, “how do we do it?” If we follow the stories Jesus tells without really paying attention, we may think about the thief coming in the night, or the master coming home from the wedding party, and think we have to be on-guard, looking out for Jesus’ kingdom, *all the time*. But here’s the thing: no one can be indefinitely alert. Studies show that most people can only really concentrate for about 45 minutes before their brains need a break. 45 minutes. So what does Jesus mean when he says, “Be ready”?

I think he means, “Eliminate distractions. Get yourself in a posture to see what I’m doing in the world. Make yourself familiar with me so you’ll recognize me when I show up.” So this whole thing isn’t just about that moment in the future when Jesus will come again – it’s about recognizing God in the every day, seeing God’s grace in all things, practicing the faith so we can live the faith, practicing the values of that kingdom God has already decided to give us.

John Ortberg teaches that the life of faith is similar to sailing in this way: we cannot force transformation on ourselves or the world, no matter how pious we act or how alert we are waiting for Jesus to come, just as none of us can make a sailboat move by any skill, focus, or good intention. The wind has to blow for our boats to move, just as the Holy Spirit must move for transformation to happen. But here’s the kicker: you gotta have the sail up to catch the wind, and you have to put yourself in the position to receive God’s spirit, as well, through spiritual practice.

You see, the life of a Christian isn’t about an hour on Sunday, though that hour may be foundational to your life of faith and is almost certainly one of the most life-giving, fun, inspirational things you do (at least I hope so!). ☺ The Christian life is about learning to posture ourselves to catch the wind, to be ready for the movement of the Holy Spirit, to turn ourselves

toward God through regular, daily practice so that when Jesus shows up in our lives, however dramatic or subtle that showing up might be, we will get it; being ready is not necessarily about staring out the window waiting for God to come, but it is about being home so we can open the door when God knocks.

I've told this story to a few of you, but I hope you'll indulge me in telling it again: There was once a group of people who decided that they had had enough of the city life, so they all moved out to the country and together they bought a farm. They felt good about being in the country, they felt good about the farm, and they especially felt good about doing it *together*. They moved into the farmhouse, got settled, and started enjoying everything the rural life had to offer. Every now and then, about once a week if nothing else important came up (they were very busy, after all), they would go out and look at the fields and feel good about themselves all over again: "We're farmers!" they exclaimed proudly. But when harvest time came, they went to gather their crops and found only weeds and insects. Because they had never tilled, never planted, never tended the soil, nothing grew.

And so many Christians are like this, too. We decide we've had enough of the materialism and selfishness that rules our society and we want something more, so we join a church, and we proudly proclaim, "We're Christians!" We come every so often and check in with the others who have made this same decision, and we feel good about what we're doing. But if we don't tend our faith, if we don't practice the spiritual disciplines, we will not grow.

This isn't about doing certain things so that when Jesus comes back, you'll make the cut and avoid sweating out eternity in unending fires – I don't think that's true, and I'm certain that's not what this text is about. But it is about doing the work of faith so that we can be

ready to receive the blessing God already has in store for us. It's about putting ourselves in a posture to see God's grace in the world, to become more and more like Jesus, to open ourselves to the transformation of the Holy Spirit, as individuals and as a congregation. We do this by practicing spiritual disciplines: Scripture, prayer, fasting, Sabbath, solitude, simplicity, worship, celebration. And as we practice, the *more* we practice, the more *regularly* we practice, we find ourselves opening our sails to the wind, opening our lives to the Holy Spirit, and before we know it, we're receiving the kingdom God has already decided to give us, reaping a harvest greater than we can presently imagine.

I used to teach an "Introduction to Spiritual Practices" class at another church. The last class I taught there had a stellar group of participants. They were all so excited about the class – they were ready to practice, ready to try something new, ready to grow in their faith – they just needed to know what to do, they said, how to practice. So I was excited to run them through the basics of some of the classic disciplines, to allow time for them to practice something new, and to share a covenant with each of them how we would practice our faith for the next 30 days. At the end of a month, I checked in with the whole group to see how they had experienced transformation through this new practice. One participant was really experiencing faith in a new way, and one was struggling but still trying; but another said, "I'll just have to try another time; so much came up this month that I didn't anticipate, it wasn't a good time to start something new."

I felt for her, not only because her life was hectic but also because she was missing out on the blessings God was offering by waiting for life to stop before she would grow in her faith. Life will never stop so that you have tons of extra time and space for spiritual practice. Life will

never stop to let you position yourself toward the Holy Spirit. Life will never stop for you to get ready to meet God. There will always be distractions, always busy-ness that pulls you away. Faith is something you decide to do in the midst of life. It's something you decide to do because you believe another life is possible and you're committed to pursuing it.

And the good news of this text, as if the coming kingdom wasn't good news enough, is that we have no reason to fear. "Do not be afraid, little sheep," Jesus says. You've already won. The kingdom is already yours. Just open yourself up to receive it. Jesus is inviting the disciples – and us – to trust that the future rests in the promises and presence of God, not in worldly things or status or fame. The future rests in the promises and presence of God. The kingdom is coming and is already here among us. The question is: are you ready to receive it? Are you ready to catch the wind?