

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Luke 12:1-11 *"Faith In Troubled Times"*

Jesus is facing increasing opposition and hostility. In this part of Luke's narrative, Jesus is in Judea, nearing Jerusalem, and he has just dealt with accusations that he is in fact an agent of the devil and not of God. He has denounced the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law, and now moves into teachings designed to prepare his disciples for the increasingly troubled times that lie ahead. Their faith will be shown, or not; it will be tested; it may or may not be deepened, depending on how they react to opposition. In all this, Jesus weaves in that such troubles are a foretaste of the great Judgment to come - both on Israel as a nation and on people everywhere. How *should* people of faith behave when times are tough? We would all like to know the answer!

1) What Not To Do And Why

Jesus casts his answer in warnings on how not to react, and why. First, do not pretend to be holier, purer, better, more pious, than you really are. That is called hypocrisy, and Jesus detests it. God knows who and what you really are, so quit pretending. All will be revealed - either simply as a matter of time, or in the face of trouble, or at the Judgment. Since God knows all, and loves you anyway, stop pretending!

Secondly, don't be afraid. Of course everyone fears death, but that is a result of

our fallen state and our guilt. That can be dealt with by repentance and faith and the atoning work that Jesus will soon complete in Jerusalem. Trust him with your life and your future, and don't be afraid of what this world can do to you. Fear God, who has the power to "throw you over the city wall" into the smoldering refuse pit called Gehenna.

But - and this is a huge but - God is not vengeful, he treats us better than our sins deserve, and he cares for the welfare of his people. We are more valuable to him than many sparrows, which are sold for a few pennies in the market! In fact his knowledge of us extends far beyond our own - even the hairs of our heads are all numbered! How can this be, we ask? Is there a heavenly ledger to record that today Peter Vibert lost hair number 3029? This is picture language to make the point that our knowledge is minute compared to God's, and he is both loving and powerful enough to care for us perfectly. This does not mean that his people will face no troubles, but that he is always with them and guides them through troubles to the place he has prepared for them. And that means, among other things, that his people have to learn, deep in their hearts, that there are worse things than death.

Third, in face of troubles, do not deny Jesus Christ - do not conceal your witness to him in the face of opposition. Be faithful, stand firm, and one day you will reap the reward

of Jesus standing up for you in the heavenly court. And do not speak ill of God's work – do not “blaspheme against the Holy Spirit.” That phrase has caused much discussion – the best interpretation seems to be the one that jumps out of Matthew's account, where Jesus utters these words immediately after he has been accused of being an agent of Satan. Do not bad-mouth God. Do not call him evil. Do not make yourself out to be more moral than God. Do not call white, black and black, white. Because in the face of opposition and persecution and trouble, you will be tempted to blame God and call him unfair, even evil.

Finally do not worry about how you will react when faced with persecution for your faith. The Holy Spirit will be with you to teach you and lead you in what you should say and do. So when times get tough, stand firm! Be faithful! This is a test of your faith! Trust God, lean on Jesus Christ, learn from the Spirit. You will come through, even if you do suffer along the way. Your greatest reward will come in the presence of the heavenly court, when Jesus says not only did he suffer for you, but you suffered for him. What greater honor could there be?

2) Faith In Trouble

Well, you may say, that's all well and good. And if I faced a situation where I had to defend my Christian faith against religious persecution, I pray I would be strong, and enabled to do so! But that's far from my mind – I am concerned right now with my family, our income, my job, my parents' health, the state of the country, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the fears that the anniversary of 9/11 brings back, the “swine flu” that will arrive any day now. And my kids are back in school, and I have to take them to practice, and drive them all over town. And I am worried more than I can admit about my daughter who has just gone off to college, about my husband's bad

temper, and about how we are going to pay our bills this winter. I have my own troubles to deal with!

So how does Christian faith work in *my* situation? What am I supposed to do and not do in the face of all this? Jesus answers again: *don't be afraid!* Your Father in heaven knows what you are going through, and he cares for you in more ways and in greater detail than you can possibly imagine! The only way you will escape the fear and anxiety that is eating you from inside is to know, deep in your heart, that God loves you and will always be with you and cares for you deeply!

Our lives, our families, our finances, our future, are in his hands, and he will not let us fall into the pit if we remain faithful to him. And so we must not panic, and start blaming other people, or him, for our present troubles. Hardship comes to everyone in different forms, and we have not been specially selected to suffer. We cannot blame God, curse him out for being unfair, become faithless in the face of troubles. Stand firm! Be faithful! It is precisely in times of trouble that our true faith is revealed, and is either strengthened or abandoned. Which is it going to be?

This *is* a test! For his own good reasons, God has brought into our lives the mix of good and bad that is the mark of a fallen world. How we react to that is critical, not only to how we get through each stage, but for what kind of person we become over time, and what relationship with God we develop over a lifetime. If we blame him, deny him, curse him, then we move ourselves farther and farther away from him, and in the end we will want nothing to do with him, and he will respect our wishes. But if we remain *people of faith*, we will find our relationship to him deepened, and we will become an example to others and a joy to our Lord. Which is it going to be?

I have known people who have faced suffering and tragedy by withdrawing from God, and from the church - just when they need them most - people whose anger remains internal and who cannot be on good terms with God or anyone else. Thank God I also know people whose faith has been deepened and widened, who have learned to depend on God and on the love, support and prayers of his people in their darkest moments! Can we forget tragedy? No. Does it mark us for life? Yes. Is it easy to get through a life marred by disease or divorce or debt or drink or drugs or death? No! Does all this make a mockery of faith? No! With our hands in God's hands, and our faith in Jesus Christ, and the Spirit whispering in our ear, we can find strength and guidance to get through life one day at a time with a measure of hope and even joy.

But we must beware, whatever the level of our faith - whether we have had it for decades and it's getting worn out, or we have only ever been on the edge of it and have never plunged in, or have been in long enough that our questions now out-number our answers - wherever we are in faith, Jesus warns us as he did his 1st C. disciples that tough times are inevitable, and we must prepare to face them, and that the Father who cares for us, the Son who died for us, the Spirit who guides us, will be there with us always *if* we will allow them to be!

But we cannot know the presence of God and the power of God and the peace of God if, under pressure, we deny that we are Christians, or we bad-mouth God when things go wrong. Denial can be very subtle - being silent in a business meeting, or at home, when we should speak; taking no action when we should get involved, because it's easier to stay out of things; being too permissive because we hate conflict; walking with the opposition when the crowds are large and the going is tough. As a nation, our

people are divided over our wars, how to restore our economy, how to provide health care, what role government should play. But too often, Christians - who should know better - are caught up in shouting matches, and show by their behavior that it is not faith that guides them.

Fear is an obstacle to faith, and to reason. But as John writes, "*perfect love casts out fear.*" Only when we know personally the love of God, and have tasted the redemption that Jesus brings, and know the inner promptings of the holy spirit, and have proved over time God's grace and his undeserved care for us, can we move out of fear into love - loving him because he first loved us. If you have lived even a few years as a Christian, you know that hard times are the ones that bring you into a deeper knowledge and trust in God. *Faith can grow* in troubled times if we will trust him. He is ready to help us!

Let us pray...