

Watchful Slaves
Luke 12:32-40
9th Sunday after Pentecost, Year C August 10, 2025
Choptank Charge Pastor Nan Duerling

Good morning, friends. Nan misses you, but is pleased to say that she is making steady improvement. Things are going well, though slowly. So far, doctor's reports are good! She would greatly appreciate your ongoing prayers.

We continue today in Luke 12 with Jesus teaching us about being watchful. Before we dive in, let's set the stage. We heard last week that Jesus taught his disciples not to worry but to trust God, who takes care of all creation. The beginning verses of today's Gospel lection, Luke 12:32-34, conclude this section of teaching. Jesus makes clear that God wants to give his children the kingdom. What he asks them to do, however, may seem quite shocking: They are to sell their possessions and give alms for the poor (12:33). The point here is that they are to be storing up treasures in heaven, where moths and thieves can't touch them. Hence, they will be far more durable than flimsy, earthly purses. The heavenly treasures will be safe forever. Jesus ends this portion by saying, "for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (12:34).

The lectionary framers and our NRSV Bibles break the lesson at 12:35. We move from the idea of *possessions* to *preparedness*. Jesus speaks a lot about being prepared for his return. In the NRSV, verses 12:35-40 are under the heading of "Watchful Slaves." Before we go any further, let's clear up this idea of slaves. The Greek word *doulos* (*doo loos*) can be translated as "slaves" or "servants." If you can't imagine yourself as a slave, even to God, think about being a servant. We don't want you to lose the rich meaning of this passage because you've tuned out to a translation that has a very negative meaning.

As verse 35 opens, we are told to be dressed and ready to go, with our lamps lit for travel. Jesus then blesses those who are prepared ("slaves whom the master finds alert" in 12:37). Here, he uses the metaphor of a master returning home after a wedding who finds his servants awake and alert.

Note that something really odd happens at the end of verse 37: The master is now suddenly the servant who will serve the watchful slaves their dinner. Note, too, that it doesn't matter what time during the night the master comes. If the slaves are prepared, they will be blessed.

That's one side of the coin. What about those who are unprepared?

They won't fare as well. Verses 39-40 of chapter 12 explain their plight. Again, using metaphor, Jesus talks about the owner of the house who would have protected his home had he known when a thief was coming. He compares his followers to the owner. We too have to be prepared for the unexpected return of Jesus.

In past weeks, we've already overheard Jesus' teaching about our use of possessions. Suffice it to say that he is not preaching a gospel of poverty or asceticism. We are not called to live under a bridge with only the clothes on our backs. We are, however, called to keep our possessions in their proper place. They are not our priority; God is. If we have something to share, we should do so. Statistics related to our giving are not very flattering, though.

According to the latest Giving USA report, Americans gave under 2% of their disposable income to charity in 2022. An interesting point, according to the Institute for Family Studies, is that lower-income households often donate between 4% and 5% of their income, compared to the 3% to 4% range for wealthier individuals. Another interesting statistic is that religious organizations continue to receive the largest share of giving dollars by affluent households, per a report by the Bank of America, which partnered with the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy to develop the *2023 Bank of America Study of Philanthropy: Charitable Giving by Affluent Households*. More affluent households tend to donate more money, but it is notable that lower income families donate a greater share of what they have. Let's be honest, these studies include more than just Christians, but they do show that lower income people tend to be more generous.

One such real life example of generosity is Osceola McCarty. She came from humble beginnings in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. She began her life's work as a washerwoman when she dropped out of school in the sixth grade to care for her ill aunt. Living economically, she never bought a car. She loved her work and continued with it throughout her life. As you can imagine, she never made much money. Yet, she lived so frugally that when she died in 1999 at age 91, she was able to give much of her \$150,000 savings to the University of Southern Mississippi so that others would have the chance to receive a college education that she never had. Her generosity prompted more than 600 donors to add to the scholarship fund that her gift had started. The university considered her as their most famous benefactor. By the way she lived her life and used her resources, Ms. McCarthy truly exemplifies the faithfulness of a true Christian disciple.

From Jesus' many teachings on money, we can draw these

conclusions: His teachings on money emphasized its potential to distract from God, urging followers to prioritize generosity and eternal rewards over material possessions. He cautioned against the love of money and the dangers of greed, while also highlighting the importance of faithful stewardship and using wealth to serve others. We need to remember what 12:32 states. In *Connections*, (Year C, Vol. 3, pub. 2019, page 231), Stephen Farris wrote about the Confessing Church's "Theological Declaration of Barmen," composed in Barmen in the German city of Wuppertal. He points out that:

There is a fascinating connection between the first verse of our passage and one of the most searing crises ever endured by any part of Christ's church. Luke 12:32 is, in effect, the biblical text of the Theological Declaration of Barmen, the 1934 public statement of the Confessing Church, the group of Christians who resisted the takeover of Germany and of the German Church by Nazi sympathizers of Adolf Hitler. Hitler had been named chancellor of Germany in 1933 as a consequence of a national vote in which the Nazi party had received more votes than any other party but still a minority of the votes of the electorate. Once in power, the Nazis began to take over all the structures of the German state, including the federation of Protestant churches of Germany. The so-called German Christians attempted to make the church a subservient organ of the Nazi state and to an alarming degree also corrupted its doctrine. They preached and taught another gospel, declaring the identity of the nation and the people the supreme good, especially as they were embodied in their Fuhrer. This was idolatry as the Confessing Church immediately recognized. The culmination of the preamble to the declaration invites the reader to test whether what the Confessing Church declares is founded on the Word of God:

"If you find that we are speaking contrary to Scripture, then do not listen to us! But if you find that we are taking our stand upon Scripture, then let no fear or temptation keep you from treading with us the path of faith and obedience to the Word of God, in order that God's people be of one mind upon earth and that we in faith experience what he himself has said: "I will never leave you nor forsake you." Therefore, "Fear not little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." (end of quotation)

Well, 'nuff said about Luke 12:32-34. Let's move to Jesus' concerns about *preparedness*, which he speaks about in the parable of the Watchful

Slaves. We probably all know people who plan ahead, who always seem to be prepared. If Plan A doesn't work, they have Plan B stuffed in their back pocket. But quite often, God has another plan that doesn't mesh with Plan A or Plan B. In this story, the watchful slaves are definitely implementing Plan A: They are awake and alert for their master's return from a wedding banquet. We have an example of such preparedness in our own history. Remember the Pony Express from your history lessons? Rev. Jerry Flury shares this story, which helps us to understand the importance of readiness:

When it comes to being on the alert and ready at all times, it's hard to beat the Pony Express. This historically famous mail service between St. Joseph, Missouri, and California depended on constant movement and readiness. Relay stations were established every ten to fifteen miles. A rider would shout aloud as he approached a station, giving the station master very short notice that he needed to be outside waiting with a fresh mount. Even when a rider came to the station where he was to spend the night, another rider was already mounted and waiting, ready to grab the first rider's bundle of packages and continue the trip. The completion of the transcontinental telegraph system rendered the Pony Express obsolete after just eighteen months. But we have this service's intriguing example of what it means to be ever watchful. (taken from *Today in the Word*, December, 1997, page 17).

The other slaves in the household Jesus refers to appear to be relying on another plan: Perhaps they expect to hear the master and will get up when he arrives to let them in...except they don't. God is portrayed as a "thief" who comes quite unexpectedly and finds some of his slaves prepared, whereas others are totally unaware. Let's be clear that God is not being compared to an evil person. Instead, the label of "thief" is meant to help us understand the unexpectedness of his return.

If we think about Luke 12:32-40 as one unit, we can see that Jesus is teaching us about priorities. So now it's time to ask: What are your priorities? How will these priorities help you to be a faithful disciple? It is easy for any of us to name something or someone we think of as a priority. But, does your calendar show that you are actually spending time on this priority? Likewise, does your checkbook show that you are contributing to what you say is important to you? If either your calendar or your checkbook belies what you claim is a priority, you are challenged to go back to the drawing board and either reassess your priorities or start to put your time,

treasure, and talent where you say your priorities are. Love, Nan