

Blogging toward Sunday

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In this Sunday's gospel, Jesus begins with the comforting word: "Do not be afraid!" Elsewhere, he has told us not to be afraid in the middle of a raging storm, or in the dark of night, or when he confronts us like a ghost after resurrection. Here, however, our fear is connected to our "possessions," our "purses" and "treasure." Then he adds a command: "Sell your possessions and give alms."

Jesus' injunction not to be afraid when linked to our money is curious. In last Sunday's gospel, Jesus warned us against "greed." Yet I daresay that most of us do not accumulate wealth due to our greed, or even for the fun of it. Our main motivation for our acquisitiveness is fear. It is as if today, in his teachings on wealth, Jesus has at last gotten to the heart of the matter.

Because I am just a few years away from retirement, I keep a close eye on the performance of my 401 K. I've heard horror stories of people who live longer than their means of support, and I fear poverty and dependency in old age. As Jesus says, my accumulation of treasure is revealing my ultimate concerns and commitments, and my greatest fears. I fear want and dependency more than I fear God. The judgments of the market mean more to me than the judgments of a righteous God. So Jesus' concluding warning about God coming upon us unexpectedly holds little fear for me. In a way, my possessions are a means, even if an unconscious means, of securing my life against the nocturnal incursions of a God who threatens to rip off everything I've got.

God a thief? It's not one of the most flattering images of God that is presented in the Gospels. Don't be afraid of poverty and dependency, downturns in the market, and poor portfolio performance, Jesus seems to say here. If you want to be afraid, be afraid of God! God is the one who shows up just when least expected (or even desired), in the middle of the night, breaks in and rips off everything that you

thought was secure.

Be prepared. Start making really prudent investments, not as the world makes investments, but those that are made out of belief in a sovereign and righteous God.

A pastor in a church of another denomination recently left a successful pulpit. Now he is under treatment for depression and in a last ditch attempt to save an unhappy marriage. When most men his age are thinking retirement, he's having to start over and rethink the course of his life. My heart went out to him in his misery.

"I really believe that God can work through all of this to give birth to something new and good for you," I said.

"Let's hope so," he said. "It sure is tough to worship God when God gets into one of these destructive modes," he said.

Jesus warned us.