

Sermon – Luke 12:32-40
David R. Lyle
Grace Lutheran Church
9 Pentecost – Year C
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“The Sheep-Stealing Savior”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Four years ago this month, our family moved into our home in Oak Park. A number of people found us right away, including Grace members bringing housewarming gifts and Grace Care volunteers bringing wonderful meals. Hot on their heels, however, were other people. People who knew we'd just moved in. People who wanted to sell us something. The first to arrive was a saleswoman from one of the big home security companies. We listened to her pitch. She offered ironclad assurances of our safety and vague assertions that we would need the protection her company could offer. Allusions were made to other neighborhoods not too far away. Crime statistics were casually mentioned. Through her unflinching smile, the goal of her words was to make us afraid. Not so afraid that we'd move. Just afraid enough to buy what she was selling. The entire pitch was built on a foundation of fear. In the end, we did purchase the security system, but we did so mostly because it gave us a discount on our homeowner's insurance. And hey, you can't be too safe. I'm not knocking security systems. We still have the thing, and we even remember to turn it on from time to time. I remain, however, ambivalent. I recognize the usefulness, but I don't like that I'm supposed to be afraid, that fear is meant to drive my decisions.
2. Then again, these days there is no shortage of things of which we might be afraid. The shootings last weekend in El Paso and Dayton, not to mention other places in recent times, not to mention the ongoing gun violence in

Chicago, have left us shaken. Such massacres have become disturbingly commonplace, and we accept their inevitability. This week we also witnessed children cut off from their parents due to large-scale immigration enforcement. The fear they felt was palpable. These fears we feel, more real all the time, are driven by fear-mongers who want us to believe that we *should* fear those who are different or other, those who come from elsewhere, those who don't look like us. This fear festers and stews until, from time to time, it boils over. And while I proffer no partisan punditry this morning, I am quite certain that the God we worship, the God who will shortly show up to place the body and blood of Jesus into our hands and onto our lips, has some clear views on the matter. This God is not in favor of racism or white nationalism; this God is not in favor of shoot-ups or separations. We can debate cause and solution but let us not forget that God is against violence and that God is for families.

3. In such fearful times, we are tempted to seek ever-stronger security for ourselves. Thicker doors, more locks, louder security alarms. The problem, however, is not simply that such things cannot finally guarantee our total safety; they also serve to divide us ever more deeply from one another. What we need is an alternate vision, a different voice. This voice speaks to us today: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." Do not be afraid, Jesus says. As he continues his teaching, what is fascinating is that Jesus does *not* follow this statement with promises of ironclad protection. Instead, he simply states that nothing we can do will keep him out. No amount of fear-driven security, no piled-high possessions, no locked doors will be able to keep Jesus from us. Jesus the Good Shepherd has come for his little flock, and he's going to get us by hook or by shepherd's crook. In our self-centered sin, the thing we most want to keep at arm's length is God. But God is having none of it. Jesus is here, and he's come for you, to steal you out of your supposed safety and set you free in and for this world. To pull you through death into life. A life lived in the open;

- a life lived unafraid; a life lived in gratitude toward God and generosity toward others.
4. Jesus paints a picture of what such a life looks like. It's a faithful life that does not depend upon possessions but sees resources as the means to bless those around us, especially those in the most need. Sell, Jesus says. Give. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out. And what, finally, is our purse that will not wear out? The ever-insightful Robert Farrar Capon hits the nail on the head: "We are rich only in our mortality," he writes. "For our death is the only thing the world cannot take away from us. . . .The astonishing graciousness of grace is that it takes the one thing you and I will never lack – the one thing, furthermore, that no one will ever want to beg, borrow, or steal from us – and makes it the only thing any of us will ever need." Does Father Capon glorify death here? Of course not. He simply gets to the heart of the matter: God uses the one thing we all have, death, and enters into it fully, to draw us – the little flock – into the Kingdom. In his death, Jesus conquers the forces of fear, of sin, death, and the devil, and in his living, Jesus invites us into real life. In our baptism, we have been freed from fear. The one thing that was always going to happen to us, *no matter what*, has already happened. You're already dead. You're already alive again. We rejoice as Jesus steals into Nolan's death this morning through holy baptism and brings him into life, abundant and eternal, with God. Try as you might, you can't keep Jesus out. Like a thief in the night, he comes for you. And in his death, he draws you into real life.
 5. Fear preys upon things that might yet be but have not yet come to pass. Faith, in contrast, rests upon things not seen, but that are nevertheless sure and certain. We do not know what will befall us in this world. Our faith draws us back to Jesus. Faith reminds us of what God has done and restores hope that God will do greater things yet. We look to what God has done and find hope for the future. This past week at its Churchwide Assembly, the Evangelical

- Lutheran Church in America – the denomination in which my colleagues and I are ordained and rostered – celebrated fifty years of women’s ordination in Lutheran churches in this country. Fifty-one years ago the sight you see this morning had never been seen before. But then the Holy Spirit did something new, waking the church to the truth of the scriptural witness and opening the doors to women gifted to lead *not* in spite of their gender or because they would do things like men, but because they would lead, prophetically and pastorally, precisely as the women God created them to be. Can you imagine a Grace Church that was never blessed with the leadership of Pastor Kersten, or Pastor Faulstich, or Pastor Wegner? Well, if God has do this, what won’t God do for God’s people? We can look back even further, of course. 4,000 years ago, Abram continued childless, doubting God’s promise. And the Lord spoke to Abram: “Look toward the heaven and count the stars. So shall your descendants be.” And look! Here we are, Abraham’s great-grandchildren of faith, after all these years. If God has do this, what won’t God do for God’s people? Most of all, 2,000 years ago, the descendant of Abraham who called us to leave fear behind hung dying on a cross, his message of grace and love, peace and hope, strung up in ridicule. Defeated, it seemed, by the real-world forces of violence and empire. And three days later Jesus was dead no more. If God has done this, what won’t God do for God’s people?
6. We don’t know what’s going to happen in our world, our nation, our city, our homes. We can’t keep every evil at bay. But we who have been baptized, we are already dead and already alive. There is nothing left to fear, and there is a world in need of our faithfulness. Let’s live on the other side of locked doors just as Jesus lives now on the other side of the stone that once sealed his tomb. I’ll keep my security system, I suppose, but it’s not what I need. Turns out all I needed was my death, that one thing we all have in abundance, that moment that God uses to claim us for life in Jesus’ name. That death, *your death*, is now in the past. You have been raised with Christ; that is your treasure and there is your heart. What is there left to fear? It is your Father’s

good pleasure to give you the Kingdom. This God, *this God*, the Father who sent the Son to free us for life in the Spirit – this God is here today. And if God has come to you, to bring you out of death and into life, what won't God do? Do not live by fear, little flock. Live by faith. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.