August 11, 2013 – 12th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 14)

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Today's Gospel is divided up into three sections that seemingly don't have too much to do with each other. The first section is a favorite around pledge campaign time – sell your possessions and give alms and store up your treasure in heaven, because where you treasure is, there your heart will be also.

The second part talks about being ready for the return of the master, and ends with the wonderful image of the master rewarding his slaves for their diligence and alertness by trading places with them and serving THEM a banquet.

And the third part talks about the fact that we won't know when Jesus will return, framed in a cautionary tale of a homeowner not knowing when a thief was going to break in and rob him. Actually, the last two sections could be considered two sides of the same coin – the necessity of being ready for the Lord's return.

Each of these little vignettes could be taken alone and a sermon written about each one. But there is a common denominator that ties them all together, along with our Old Testament and Epistle readings as well. That common denominator is faith.

"The word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision." And what did that word say? "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." And Jesus said to his disciples, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

Notice that God doesn't make demands in return for goodies. In the first of the great covenants between God and the people of Israel, God promises Abram as many descendants as there are stars. And Abram believed and is reckoned by God as being righteous. Abraham's faith is his response to the covenant initiated by God

This is also the foundation for the first section of our Gospel reading. God is has already given us his kingdom. Period. It's only after this that Jesus tells us to sell our possessions and give to the poor. This should be OUR response to God for the covenant he made with us in Jesus. But it's a voluntary action on our part. No one is making us give anything away.

Sometimes I ask myself, why would anyone voluntarily give away anything they owned, especially if they had worked hard for it? God has made it pretty clear that he won't back out of his end of the deal – giving us his kingdom – because we do or don't act a certain way. God is not unfaithful.

But WE are. We have been given the greatest gift in the universe, and throughout history we have tossed it aside in favor of a fleeting pleasure or a false sense of security. We're unfaithful.

On the other hand, if we were perfect, we wouldn't need Jesus to show us the way, would we? Here, he's showing us that selling our possessions and giving to the poor is one way of being faithful.

But this really begs the question of why we need faith in the first place. What good does it do us? More and more people today are claiming to be atheists who profess no faith at all, and they are just fine with that. Why should we bother at all? I know that sounds kind of funny coming from a priest, but these are questions I hear about a lot. Why bother with faith? Why bother with God?

I'm not sure I know all the answers – in fact, I'm pretty sure I don't – but I do have a theory. I think we have some things hard wired into us at our creation. For instance, I think we all are born with a God-given conscience, although it's something that can be overcome by sheer will power. I think we have God-given free will, which causes the aforementioned problems with conscience.

And I think we have faith. Again, as it says in Hebrews, faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. We have faith that when we get out of bed in the morning our feet will stay on the floor, or in other words, gravity. We have faith that photons will be converted into neurological energy and translated by our brains into light and images. We have faith that sound waves will bounce off of our eardrums and be translated by our brains into sounds, and further, into words and music. And even if we were to lose our hearing or our sight, or were sent into space where there is no gravity, we would still have faith in their existence.

And I think we also have that same faith in God, either God as we know him from our tradition, or whatever expression of the Creator people are most comfortable with. For some it's Yahweh. For some it's Allah. For some it's their Higher Power. For some it's whoever set off the Big Bang, or designed the human genome.

And that's the answer. We have faith because we can't NOT have faith. When I was starting out as a singer, I often was told by my coaches and teachers that if I could think of doing anything else I should, because being a singer would break my heart. But I couldn't not be a singer – it's what I was, and what I still am.

Human beings are created to have faith in their Creator. We can't help it. But our response to this faith – what we do with it – is entirely our choice. We can ignore it, and perhaps even suppress it like we can our conscience, or we can build it up by serving others.

I love a poem called *The Paradoxical Commandments,* which has been attributed to Mother Teresa, but was actually written by Dr. Kent M. Keith. It could be thought of as a series of calisthenics for our faith.

*People are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered.*

*Love them anyway.*

*If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives.*

*Do good anyway.*

*If you are successful, you will win false friends and true enemies.*

*Succeed anyway.*

*The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow.*

*Do good anyway.*

*Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable.*

*Be honest and frank anyway.*

*The biggest men and women with the biggest ideas can be shot down by the smallest men and women with the smallest minds.*

*Think big anyway.*

*People favor underdogs but follow only top dogs.*

*Fight for a few underdogs anyway.*

*What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight.*

*Build anyway.*

*People really need help but may attack you if you do help them.*

*Help people anyway.*

*Give the world the best you have and you'll get kicked in the teeth.*

*Give the world the best you have anyway.*

I challenge us all to examine our faith. Is it strong and unwavering or weak and fearful, or both at times? Do we act on our faith, or let others do the acting? What feeds our faith, and what starves it? I think, if we're honest in our examination, we might find some interesting answers.

In the meantime, we are still called to sell our possessions and give to the poor, and to be on the alert for the coming of the Master, and above all, to be thankful that God has been delighted to give us his kingdom.

As we say at the end of our celebration of Holy Eucharist:

The gifts of God for the people of God, Take them in remembrance that Christ died for you, and feed on him in your hearts by faith, with thanksgiving.

Let us do everything we do and live every day by faith and with thanksgiving.

Amen.