

“Positioned to be Surprised”
Luke 12:32-40
Sunday, August 7, 2016
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

My father-in-law is gone now. When he was alive, he used to love it when Jehovah’s Witnesses or Mormons or similar folks would come to his door. He would love to invite them in and offer them a cup of coffee and debate scripture with them.

Me...I like to pretend I’m not at home... hide behind the curtains... peek out after a bit to make sure they’ve gone. Somehow I feel bad not wanting to talk to them; but at the same time, I don’t want to talk to them. Usually I open the door, smile, say I’m the pastor of the United Methodist Church, thank them for coming by, and close the door before they can get a word out.

The story is told of two young missionaries who were going door to door. They knocked on the door of one woman who, like me, was not at all happy to see them. The woman told them in no uncertain terms that she did not want to hear their message and slammed the door in their faces. To her surprise, however, the door did not close and, in fact, almost magically bounced back open.

She tried again, really putting her back into it, and slammed the door again with the same amazing result -- the door bounced back again.

Convinced that one of the young religious zealots was sticking his foot in the door, she reared back to give it a third slam. She felt this would really teach them a lesson. But before she could act, one of them stopped her and politely said, “Ma’am, before you do that again, you really should move your cat.”

It’s funny how, when we focus on one thing, we can completely miss something that is

even more important. Like a poor cat, caught in the doorway.

This morning's gospel reading is a difficult passage to wrestle with. The danger is that we saddle ourselves with yet another legalistic burden – the burden of constant spiritual “readiness.” Such constant readiness is impossible. And not even desirable. And, perhaps, not even what Jesus is really getting at.

No one can be on high alert at all times. Jesus himself seems to say contradictory things within this one Bible passage (Luke 12:32-40): “Do not be afraid” (v. 32), and, “You must be ready” (v. 40).

I. Positioned to be Surprised.

It's our frame of mind that's important.

Some scholars suggest that we “position ourselves to be surprised,” as a way to live out Jesus' teaching (Gene Lowry). We go about our daily lives – working, eating, enjoying rest and relaxation. At the same time, in all our activities, we position ourselves to be surprised by God...ready to be shaken from our regular routine...ready for something new and different and amazing that God is preparing...

It's easy, however, to get caught in a workaholic interpretation of this idea. Instead of wearing ourselves out trying to achieve constant alertness, we need to be “ready” in a creative, loose, open-to-the-universe kind of way.

God is always surprising us. Sometimes we miss the surprise, like the woman who fails to notice the cat in the doorway. We need an attitude of expectation that God is doing great things among us. We need hearts and minds that are open to new possibilities.

By occasionally looking at the world from a different perspective or seeing our lives from a new vantage point, we position ourselves to be surprised.

On the other hand, if we are always looking at the same old world from the same old perspective, perched at our habitual vantage point, we position ourselves to see the same things we always see. We miss God's surprises.

"[Think about] 'creative people' (composer, artist, author, mathematician, scientist, preacher) who, in taking a break, encounter a breakthrough. It does not 'just happen.' One must carefully nurture disciplined awareness over time. Through that funded awareness, fresh insight comes while (and from where) one 'is not looking'...[New York artist Charlotte Lichtblau] puts it this way: 'I listen to the colors, who tell me, in good time, and in no uncertain terms, how I must proceed.' The painting thus produced is at once a gift *to, from, and through* the painter." (David J. Schlafer)

II. Quantity and Quality.

In her book, The Artist's Way, Julia Cameron writes in terms of "quantity" and "quality." She says of artists that, "We are in charge of the quantity; God is in charge of the quality." (paraphrase).

The idea of "readiness," in Cameron's view, is that the artist does the work of practicing her art every day. Painting after painting, paragraph after paragraph, melody after melody. The artist does not pause to worry about the quality of the art. The artist creates, day after day, and leaves the question of quality in God's hands.

Likewise, in the spiritual life, we practice our Christian art, day after day. We follow the way – Jesus' Way – and we leave the quality of our lives to God. Readiness in this understanding is not so much about being alert or watchful in a frightened or workaholic way. We're not constantly alert to sin because we're afraid of hell. We're not constantly watchful for Christ's return because we're anxious to earn our way into heaven.

Rather, our daily way of living is an expression of the spiritual art of being a Christian. We practice what we preach. We live, to the best of our ability, what we learn from scripture. We listen for the Spirit's leadings as Charlotte Lichtblau listens to her colors.

I believe that the work of the church is more an art than a business. Certainly we have to follow good business practices in the business aspects of the church.

But the leadings and directions of a church -- the "listening to the colors" of God's movement among us -- that is an art. And we are an artist's colony, encouraging our fellow artists -- our church family -- in the ways of Christ.

"One of the musicians who played many years for Toscanini said that the maestro had the ability to make the orchestra feel it was playing a well-known work for the first time. Each repeated playing of the score was done as if it were the premiere performance. After once recording the Beethoven Ninth Symphony, Toscanini said he had been conducting the Beethoven Ninth for over fifty years. He continued, 'Now I think I finally understand it.' Routine can yield its blessings if we stay awake." (Wallace H. Kirby)

Rather than "routine," I would call it "disciplined practice," or a lifelong commitment to an artistic path; or, for the Christian, a lifelong commitment to a spiritual path.

We often fear such commitment. If we give ourselves fully to the lifelong pursuit of the Christian path -- the Way of Jesus -- we fear we will lose something. Jesus says, in verse 32, "Do not be afraid, little flock," because he knows that we are afraid. And if we're not afraid at this moment, he knows that we will be afraid sometime in the near future. To do the daily work of the Christian life and leave the outcomes to God...to surrender our whole selves to God and trust in his good plans for us...to position ourselves to be surprised and to trust that the surprise will be a good one -- that's more trust than most of us can muster on a regular basis. It's impossible

what Jesus asks – to be constantly ready...to be constantly trusting.

Closing

In her book called Dakota, Kathleen Norris, “tells how she and her husband, also a writer, moved away from the heady literary atmosphere and advantages of New York City to one of the most remote towns in America, Lemmon, South Dakota. She relates how most of her friends were shocked by their contemplated move. The prospects for even reasonable survival as thinking persons seemed as remote as the little town they chose to live in. But Kathleen Norris subtitled her book ‘A Spiritual Geography,’ because it was in that sparse geography that she found her own spirit more than ever. In Lemmon, South Dakota, she blossomed as the person and writer she suspected she could be. Most of her self-discovery was pleasing and would have been impossible had she insisted on remaining in the ‘safe’ literary environment of New York. Jesus says, ‘Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom,’ and we might add, ‘kingdoms you never dreamed possible.’ People find this out when they take the plunge. What are we afraid of?” (Richard W. Patt)

We know what we’re afraid of, don’t we? We’re afraid we’ll lose our Selves, with a capital “S,” if we take that plunge. Or we’re afraid we’ll fail – we’ll be one of those slaves who falls asleep and misses the rewards of the Master’s return. We won’t be watchful enough; we won’t be alert; we won’t be ready.

Remember Jesus’ words: “Be ready” (v. 40)...but “Do not be afraid” (v. 32). Position yourself to be surprised. Practice the art of being a Christian every day. And, as you come to the Table this morning, know that God is in charge. All is well.

Amen.