

"Finding Security in an Insecure World"

Psalm 121; Luke 13:22-30

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

May 29, 2016 – 2nd Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

John Wooden, former UCLA basketball coach, wrote of his most devastating defeat. It wasn't in the college ranks, but back when he was in high school. His team was playing in the state championship game. They were leading by one point with just seconds to play. One of his teammates, thinking that time had expired, threw the ball in the air to celebrate. A member of the other team, however, caught it mid-air and threw it almost the length of the court. The ball went cleanly through the basket, and Wooden's team had sure victory snatched away in crushing defeat.

That story has some similarities with today's reading from Luke. In that parable Jesus says that a lot of confident religious folk, at the end of the game of life, are going to find themselves losers in the end. Some who think they are securely in the Kingdom will find themselves on the outside looking in. Victory will be turned to defeat. God will say in effect, "I don't recognize you."

"Someone asked him, 'Lord, will only a few be saved?' He said to them, 'Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and not be able.'" Jesus here uses the imagery of a door as the entry point to God's realm. The fact that admittance isn't all that easy should not be surprising. The standard for entrance, of course, would be high. That shouldn't surprise us.

The parable continues, "When once the owner of the house has got up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, open to us,' then in reply he will say to you, 'I do not know where you come from.' Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank with you, and taught you in our streets.' But he will say, 'I do not know where you come from....'"

The purpose of Jesus' story was not to discourage people, but to challenge the smug righteousness of many religious adherents who felt they had it made. Some, like the Pharisees, regarded outward keeping of the Law as fully sufficient to assure them God's favor and a place in eternity. They had an arrogance that proclaimed they had already "earned" their way to God. They were confident that they had, in essence, pulled themselves up to the Lord. Or so they thought. Jesus cautioned them not to be so sure about the future. He confronted their so-called security.

We're not so far removed from the Pharisees, and others like them, that we can't understand their motivation. Security is also one of our chief concerns in life. In fact, that's among our most common words. We use it in connection with almost everything: national security, office security, plant security, social security.

Security implies a state of stability, of safety. It has a comfortable ring to it. Advertisers know that and use it often to appeal to us:

* "Wouldn't you like to have retirement security? Let our bank help you with your investments."

* "Don't take a chance on offending. Use our leading deodorant and know that you'll have the security of freshness all day."

* "All insurance companies aren't alike. Get a piece of security. Get a piece of the Rock."

There's nothing wrong with wanting to have assured employment, assured neighborhoods, assured income. In fact, we spend much of our time and effort in life preparing for a secure future. A person assembling an investment portfolio is not all that different from a squirrel burying acorns. Both actions are intended to create confidence for the days ahead.

The whole idea of security is really about peace of mind. We want to believe that, ultimately, things are under control, even if there is some unpredictability about it. Types and levels of security also change from time to time. Generations experience different circumstances that shape their outlook on life.

My most formative years were the 1950's and 60's. Some of you also grew up then. In my middle class, small town I felt economically secure and there was general optimism that each generation would fare better materially than the one which had preceded it. We had a nice home. My father was never out of work. I never questioned that I would be anything but secure financially when I got out of school. As long as I applied myself, I felt I would have what it takes to live a good life.

We had little crime in our community and the voters had never turned down a school levy. I never heard about children being abused, though that was no guarantee it didn't happen. We didn't have to take our Halloween candy to be x-rayed. I could go along to pick up Uncle Bill from the airport without having to empty my pockets and step through a metal detector.

But there was one big area of insecurity, a frightening one, in my life at that time. I'm sure it affects me subconsciously even today. Recently I heard someone in a radio interview talking about her childhood in that period and some of her fears. She mentioned one especially, and it was then I began to fully realize how much this fear had been part of my life, too. I realized anew the impact it made on me, and probably on many of my contemporaries.

You know, that's one of the problems of childhood. We're happy-go-lucky most of the time, know little about the world's troubles, and are oblivious to family problems unless they're most obvious. When something looms so large that it can't be kept out, then we're in trouble. We have little experience in dealing with problems of this magnitude, with circumstances that are totally out of our control. They permeate the day with sudden fears and penetrate the night in dreams.

I remember one spring day when I was in elementary school, I was startled by a loud crash. I looked out the big windows of the classroom which faced south and saw nothing unusual, just blue sky with a few clouds. Then another crash. I couldn't sit still. I got up quickly and told my teacher I was sick.

Instead of going to the restroom, however, I left the building and started to run the two blocks home. Then halfway there, another boom, and for the first time I looked back, to the north, in the direction of the sound. The sky was black with an approaching thunderstorm, even though the sun shone directly overhead. My uncontrolled fear was calmed and I made my way back to school.

You see I thought, I feared, we were at war and the booms I heard were the distant explosions of atomic bombs, coming ever closer and closer. If devastation was on the way, I knew I didn't want to meet it in a classroom. I wanted to be home, with my mother who was probably caught unprepared as well while doing the washing. If I was to suffer, I wanted it to be at home.

Now that probably sounds pretty laughable. But it wasn't to me then, and you know, it isn't even now. It all came rushing in preparing this sermon on security. That particular childhood memory was deeply tucked away, but not forgotten.

Many of us who grew up at that particular time in history share that same terror. We saw films about civil defense, witnessed that ominous mushroom-shaped cloud that appeared on the screen, heard the narrator tell us to take the appropriate actions when directed and, memorize the shelter locations in our town.

So in those days we practiced going under our desks and putting our hands over our heads. Sometimes we were told of the alert in advance, sometimes the bell just rang in the middle of reading or math, and someone in the hallway shouted "air raid." I know now that people were just trying to look after our best interest, but it still scared the daylights out of me when I was eight.

Nothing seemed to give me security in the midst of such faceless, arbitrary terror. I was powerless to prevent it, unable to understand it, and not mature enough to talk about it. So a thunderclap was all it took to trigger a panic response, because I lived with this fear so closely. It was part of the national psyche.

Adults carried on even when world tensions were at a peak. They usually found ways of coping, of going on with the daily routine, even if it was just to take a stiff drink occasionally. Adults scared the heck out of kids with fallout shelters, stockpiling, and all their preparations for the worst. Talk about feeling that things are out of control! In fact, the only places where this nagging fear of annihilation didn't seem to be so overwhelming was when I was at home or in church. That was a clue even back then.

People will do a great deal in life to find security in an otherwise insecure world. They'll go to almost any expense, try all the obvious directions, and convince themselves that they've got it when actually they don't. They'll use money or power or prestige as a mechanism, not realizing how transient and futile all this is.

Our scripture for today points us to the true direction, the locus of real security in life. It is not of our own doing, but a gift to respond to.

"Strive to enter the narrow door," says Jesus. Locate the entry point to full life, then dare to move on in. The time to do it is now. Christ makes it clear that the key to real security is faith, for only through faith do we develop a sustaining relationship with God.

This kind of security is the only real security to be found in life. It's heart and hand working together because of love for God. Then, no matter how hard the winds of misfortune may blow from time to time, there will still be calm at the center.

True security can't be bought, bartered, or stolen. True security is found only in things of the Spirit, done with hope | but without an expectation of reward. True security is knowing we are loved despite our faults. True security is a dedicated life lived everyday with God at its center.

It can't keep all the fears out, but it can help to keep them in perspective through God's unconditional love for us.