

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

*St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA*

*August 10, 2025*

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## Unexpected and Unwelcome

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

I've been struggling with this passage from Luke 12. I'm generally not a fan of these sorts of narratives that rely so heavily upon the master/slave dynamic. It is understandable though, that Jesus would use such negative imagery. When roughly 90% of the your population falls into the category of subsistence farmer/fisher/shepherd or slave, it's kind of hard to avoid this troublesome analogy.

And it doesn't help that the language switches between the two examples Jesus provides. In the first portion we have a slave master who return is unexpected. Then the language switches to that of a thief in the night, whose presence is quite unwelcome by the owner of the house.

So we have the unexpected return of a master who then reverses roles and serves his slaves. Was this the Roman feast of Saturnalia? Such role reversals were part of those festivities. Somehow I don't think that's was Jesus was referencing. After that we have he coming of a thief in the night, who the owner of the house would have guarded against if he could have. Not only is the Son of Man unexpected in this scenario, he's also very unwelcome. Thieves, after all, come to take things away from people.

But what do these analogies really mean? God's coming is both unexpected and unwelcome? That seems an odd lesson to teach. Well, when I'm uncertain of a text one of the first things I do is consider it's literary context.

What happened before and what happens after may give us some insight into the unexpected and unwelcome arrival of the Son of Man.

We were in the same chapter of Luke last week when we heard Christ's admonishment to not be greedy. We heard the parable of the foolish landowner who thought he could hoard up all he had for his own benefit only to discover that there's nothing really there when his end comes.

The verses that follow that parable likely go along with it. In those verses Jesus talks about not obsessing over material things, and to consider the raven and the lily; especially how God cares for them both. These words of contrast with the parable of the foolish landowner provide followers of the Way with a positive example and an important lesson on worry. This long lesson on greed is then concluded with verse 31: "Instead, seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well."

Our pericope for today begins with a reference to this previous teaching, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."<sup>1</sup> Then he continues to talk about possessions and treasures, reminding us that "where our[sic] treasure is, there our[sic] hearts will be also." And from that verse Jesus launches into the two parables we read not long ago.

So...given that literary context...what do you suppose Jesus might be thinking about as he tells these two odd little stories? Perhaps it has something to do with the radically counter-cultural teaching he's just given. A teaching that is quite likely both unexpected and unwelcome by many who will hear the Gospel.

The readings following the pericope for today go on to have Jesus talking about casting fire upon the earth and causing divisions, even among families.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 12:32 (NRSVUE)

This 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke is a doozy! All of these teachings are being given to a crowd of thousands and the first words Jesus utters in this difficult chapter are, “Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees, that is, their hypocrisy.”<sup>2</sup> He then speaks of hidden things being drawn into the light. Our context all points to Jesus spoiling for a fight. He knows the message he brings will not be well received by those in power in particular. It won’t be popular among those who find comfort in the status quo either. The Gospel Jesus brings is a revolutionary one...a dangerous one.

“Sell your possessions and give alms,”<sup>3</sup> Jesus says. As if it were that easy! As if God doesn’t want us to hoard resources but rather share them. As if material possessions often end up owning us instead of the reverse. As if there’s nothing real atop the social ladder. As if this teaching doesn’t threaten the American consumerist way of life!

Of course the Gospel is unexpected...good news to the poor? Release to the captives? Sight to the blind? Liberation to the oppressed? Proclaiming the Jubilee year when all debts are erased and land is returned?<sup>4</sup> That goes against just about every system humanity has ever established. We tend to much prefer “might makes right” after all...that is certainly how the world is working today.

And now we find why the Gospel is unwelcomed too. Like a thief in the night the Gospel can rob the wealthy of poor to exploit. It can rob oppressors of slaves to abuse. It robs those who hoard of the security they seek. It robs any who would exploit others of their justifications and reasonings. The Gospel lays bare the cruelty of human systems and prompts us to change them. The Gospel teaches us to recognize the humanity in every person and to seek the Kingdom of God...a Kingdom in which all needs are met and all

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 12:1d (NRSVUE)

<sup>3</sup> Luke 12:33 (NRSVUE)

<sup>4</sup> A summary of Luke 4:18-19

human dignity is realized. A Kingdom we are called to strive for in the here-and-now, even if it's unexpected and unwelcome. Amen.