

## Scripture Readings: Luke 12: 16-21

<sup>16</sup>Then [Jesus] told them this parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. <sup>17</sup>And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ <sup>18</sup>Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. <sup>19</sup>And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ <sup>20</sup>But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ <sup>21</sup>So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

## Philippians 2: 12-14, 3: 10-14, and 4: 8-9

2. <sup>12</sup>Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, <sup>13</sup>for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose. <sup>14</sup>Do everything without complaining or arguing, <sup>15</sup>so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe <sup>16</sup>as you hold out the word of life—in order that I may boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor for nothing. [As for me,]

3. <sup>10</sup>I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, <sup>11</sup>and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. <sup>12</sup>Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. <sup>13</sup>Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, <sup>14</sup>I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

4. <sup>8</sup>Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.

<sup>9</sup>Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

### The Sermon:

Most children who have grown up with immigrant parents, myself included, know something about the pressure to succeed. Go as far as you can in school. Accumulate what other accolades you can along the way, whether it's in music or dance or whatever. Sacrifice for your goals in life – don't expect the instant gratification that Canadian children do. Save your money. Above all, get a good paying job. Be a doctor, a lawyer or a banker if possible. Marry well and raise your own little over-achievers, who will prove to their grandparents Canada's potential for upward mobility within two generations. My mother, who was not the immigrant in the household, had no other goal for me than that I should be happy, but my Dad believed happiness in life would only come through achieving something of which I could justly be proud. During my school years I always followed the script pretty well, and my father probably blames Christianity for steering me off-script. He's not exactly ashamed to tell people he's got a minister for a daughter, but he would have a lot more satisfaction, I think, in telling people he'd got a daughter who was a brain surgeon, or who had married one.

For the past two years this last week of August has seen me preparing a letter for the parents of our VBS kids. I want to reach especially the ones who aren't attending church anywhere, in the hopes that they might bring their kids here to Sunday school. Most of the kids who come to VBS really love what they're learning and would be eager to join us, if only their parents could be convinced to bring them to us each week. So my letter is an attempt at persuasion. Parents who have a Christian faith themselves understand the importance of passing that faith on to their children. But how *do* you persuade parents who, themselves, have no particular relationship with Christ or his church, that this is something they should want for their kids? For make no mistake, unless a family makes a positive decision to bring their kids out, it will not happen of its own accord. Coming to church when you are unused to doing so requires an exertion. It requires the formation

of a habit. And most parents don't *mind* exerting themselves to get their kids out to soccer, or some other activity in which they see value, but what is the value in coming to church? Why is Sunday school important enough to deserve priority status in a busy household? That is the case that has to be made.

One of the saddest things I have ever heard a child say, was said by a child last summer at VBS. That year I did the Tuesday morning session with the kids in the church sanctuary. The sanctuary makes a powerful visual impact upon kids, especially upon kids who have seldom been to church. They are impressed by the solemn and serene look of the place. And they know instinctively that something holy goes on here. As one little boy of 7 looked around, his memory was drawn back perhaps three or four years to a time when his family were regular attenders at church. He said matter of factly: “yeah, I remember, we used to come to a place like this, but now we do T-ball.” So sad, because that little boy had discerned that a shift in priorities had taken place in his family. His parents were sending him a message loud and clear that would probably influence him for the rest of his life – a message which said “recreation is important; the worship of God is not important.”

I believe that most parents want to do the right thing for their kids. Jesus even says that, doesn't he? “If you, then, who you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! (Luke 11.13)” So why is it that they choose T-ball over church? I think some parents put their kids in sports because they believe if they're kept busy they'll be kept out of harm's way. Sports socialize kids as well as training them physically. The best coaches emphasise teamwork, good sportsmanship and good effort over simply a winning result, but let's face it, sports are competitive. There are winners and there are losers and some parents even value that competitive aspect as a good preparation for life in a competitive world. Some parents want their children to succeed because they are competitive themselves – *they* are

players in a world, which they understand to be organised as a competition, where only the ones who consistently make their sales quotas stand a chance of promotion, and only those who get promoted get to move to the bigger house in the better neighbourhood. Ask this kind of parent and they will tell you that to set kids up for success you have to start early. Take the sketch pad away from your boys, even if they like to draw – there’s no money in that. Take the ice cream away your girls – fat women don’t marry rich husbands. In the movie *Little Miss Sunshine*, Greg Kinnear plays exactly that kind of father. For him, as a motivational speaker, the world is divided into winners and losers, and he wants to set up his children to be winners in life. Other parents, like *my Mum* and like the Mum in *Little Miss Sunshine*, just want their kids to be happy, but these parents too can assume that their children’s happiness, their good sense of self, depends upon winning in sports, or looking good by the standards of their peers.

Now if these are the goals that parents have for their children, then they’d be right to look at Christianity and say: “this sort of teaching doesn’t advance those goals at all!” In church and in Sunday school we’re taught that *everyone* has value, and that, if anything, God and Jesus seem perversely to favour the losers. In church and in Sunday school kids are taught values that will actually hamper them in some of the skills they may need to get to the top. If Christian teaching does its work, then kids will hold themselves to high standards of honesty and integrity. They will have the courage to be a whistle-blower when they see an injustice, regardless of the consequences, and they will have a conscience. All of these things may in fact hamper them in their ability to succeed in a world which requires the strong to crawl over the weak on their way up the ladder.

Basically this is what the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche had against Christianity – he believed that the church was designed to hold back the strong through a kind of tyranny by the weak. He felt it took people of real excellence, whose natural destiny was to

soar high, and convinced them that they should lag behind with the pack – with those who were merely mediocre. I have to say that I don't agree with Neitsche's analysis of Christianity. I think the teaching we receive in the church should spur us on to excellence, but excellence for Christians is measured in a different way than the world measures it. Excellence for Christians is not measured by how much grain we have in our barns, or how many people we have speaking well of us, or how many games we win the season; it is measured by how closely we resemble the perfect humanity we see in Jesus Christ. Listen to this passage of Paul: *“Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe.”* Stars in the Universe. Hardly a calling to mediocrity, is it? *“I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings,”* Paul continues, *“becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection of the dead. Not that I have already obtained all this...but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. [This] one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”* You can hear in Paul's words, can't you? the kind of focus, sacrifice and self-discipline that we admire in our Olympic athletes. Is he any less of a champion because he has taken as his goal a Christ-like character as opposed to a gold medal?

Now it not everyone's goal in life to embrace suffering. But this is an ethic which superior sportsmen and Christians share – the ethic of “no pain, no gain.” Certainly *Christ* himself, realized that, and Hebrews says he was willing to endure the cross for the sake of the joy that was set before him (Hebrews 12.2). The more like Christ Christians become, the more of a share in his sufferings they will have, but the more assurance of his power and his glory also. I can well understand that parents would not want this lot for their

child – parents want their children to succeed, not to suffer, and when they bring their kids to Sunday school they should really beware, because if the teaching sticks, then suffering there certainly will be. But who would not be proud this week to be Bob or Linda Van Norman – parents of a daughter who thrust herself into a burning apartment building here in Guelph to awaken a sleeping man. Sarah Van Norman was treated for smoke inhalation as a result, but her suffering had the ultimate significance – it saved a man’s life. Sarah, now an officer with the OPP, grew up here in our Sunday school, and I’m not saying that it passed through her mind before she entered that burning building: “I must make my old Sunday school teachers proud; I must set my face like flint, just like Jesus” but that young woman had a character which was strongly enough formed in the virtues, to lead her on to heroic action.

Finally, Paul says, “*whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.*” The pursuit of virtue should begin in childhood, but I think we understand that lessons about selflessness and service, about courage and integrity, about looking to Christ as our measure of true excellence, are not only for the Sunday School. This is the ethic that we are all called to as Christians. And it will not do if we are out there in the world chasing some *other* prize from Monday through Saturday, and only on Sunday exalt the goal of “whatsoever is true...”

And so adults must choose, and crucially parents must choose what prize it is which will take the priority. Will it be the life of success or the life of significance? Will we train to win in a competitive world, or train to gain a Christian character? “May the mind of Christ my Saviour live in me from day to day, Jesus’ love and power controlling all I do or say. May I run the race before me, strong and brave to face the foe, looking only onto Jesus, as I onward go.”

“Christian Character in a Competitive World”

*Preached By: Rev. Karla Wubbenhorst on August 31, 2008*

Now unto him who loved us and has washed us from every spot and stain, and will present us perfect at the day of his coming, be all honour and glory in the church, both now and forever.