



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

October 21, 2012

"On Meeting Jesus" - Luke 12:35-48 (Gospel of Luke Series)

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You may have seen a current bumper sticker, "*Honk if you love Jesus. Text if you want to meet Him.*"

Before that sign came out I encountered another one like it. When I had surgery a few months ago my wife took me to the hospital. We went in her car and she drove. As we entered the hospital parking lot and went round and round—it seemed like forever—looking for a parking place, I began to be a little anxious.

Oh, I knew in my heart and spirit I was in God's hands and that I was, therefore, in good hands. And I knew He was going to take good care of me, no matter what. It's that "no matter what" part that makes me uneasy at times. God seldom reveals what that will be. So the creature part of me kicked in just like my dog's creature part kicks in the minute we enter our veterinarian's parking lot. She gets very uneasy. Her body language says, "I'm not going in there!"

Well, my body too was becoming somewhat rebellious so I sent up a quick prayer for some sign or signal that would set me at ease. At that moment Mimi finally pulled into a parking space and as I opened the door to get out of the car, there on her car door was a sign in big bold print, "Meeting Jesus". It did not set me at ease.

I learned two things through that experience. I learned that Mimi was preparing for a small group Bible study and had stuck the study guide upright in the pocket of her car door. The only thing that was showing was the title, "Meeting Jesus".

I also learned or re-learned what I already knew—that although God *can* and sometimes *does* speak to us through signs or outward signals, it is usually the lowest form of divine communication, and therefore unreliable. It also gives opportunity for the enemy to send his signals, which I think he did that day giving me a very unsettled feeling even using the things of God to do it—a method which is also a trick of the enemy's.

Not, of course, that I'm not looking forward to meeting Jesus. I am. But I can identify with Billy Graham when after a warning by a trusted Christian friend that the plane he was about to board was going to crash, he sent up a quick prayer for safety. Not that he was afraid of death—he said he knew he was going to heaven and he looked forward to meeting Jesus but he didn't want to do it from an airplane. I did not want to meet Jesus from that operating room.

This sermon is about meeting Jesus because that's what the parable is about in the Gospel of Luke which is our Bible passage this

morning. I wish it wasn't about meeting Jesus. I don't like this topic. It's too close to the things that scared me away from God when I was a kid growing up in Georgia.

My family took summer vacation trips into north Georgia. We would drive through the beautiful Blue Ridge mountains, and every few miles the stunning scenery would be ruined by five words painted in huge letters, "PREPARE TO MEET THY GOD!"

The words were not done very artfully, and were sometimes misspelled but they WERE placed very strategically—like on a big rock seen squarely in front of our car just as we would start around a dangerous hairpin curve with a drop-off so far down that it would make you dizzy to look. The sign would read: "PREPARE TO MEET THY GOD."

Of course it was all designed to produce fear. And it did—at least in me. So much fear that I decided I never wanted to have anything to do with whoever those people were who painted those rocks. I didn't fear God so much, but I really did come to fear those kinds of people.

When I entered high school there was a Bible club that met regularly. Students who belonged to it brought big Bibles to school. They were strange people. They were nice, but they were strange.

I was convinced they were the people who painted those signs on the rocks or were at least close kin. So whenever I saw one of those kids I would go out of my way to avoid an encounter. I fully thought that if I got too close, one was going to grab me by the collar and ask, "Are you prepared to meet thy God?"

I've never want to be that kind of person to anybody. That's why I said to myself, "Oh no!" when it fell upon me to preach on this passage in Luke because guess what? The theme of this passage is clearly "PREPARE TO MEET THY GOD." I tried real hard to make this passage say something else, but it won't say anything else.

You'll see what I mean as I read from the Gospel of Luke. It's from Chapter 12, verses 35-48.

This is a parable and the dictionary definition of a parable says it's "a short descriptive story designed to bring home a single truth." It's said, and correctly, that you can't make a parable walk on all fours. One single truth is the key here.

I don't have to tell you the main thrust of this parable. Your common sense has already told you. The meaning is simply this: Jesus is coming back to set up his Kingdom forever. Be ready! Be ready now!

This is not a description of God's judgment upon the world. There are many other places in the Bible that describe in some detail God's action at the end of the world and the second coming of Christ... but not here.

This solely has to do with action on our part in preparing for the end, whether that end means our

death—our departure from earth—or Christ's return to earth. The byword here is "Be ready!". "Be ready to meet Jesus!" We can see that in the very first lines of the parable.

Look at verses 35-36: *"Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks."*

We know that the Hebrew wedding feasts were always huge events that could last for days. They started on time but there was no strict timetable as to when they would end. The party and feast time was essentially the honeymoon, and it all ended when the groom decided to bring his bride home to his own house.

So in this story, Jesus is speaking of the master of a large estate who got married and left his servants in charge of his property until he returned home from his honeymoon. They had no clue as to when that would be. Jesus said if this master's servants stayed alert: had the house in shape; kept oil in the lamps; and had their game-day uniforms on when the master returned with his bride...it would be a win win situation. The master would be so happy he would put on an apron and he himself would put on a feast for his servants.

But woe be to that servant who said to his fellow servants, "Hey, guys, our master won't be home for a long time. Let's round up the cooks and have a neighborhood party. We've got plenty of time to clean up and get the place straight before he gets back." Jesus said that master will surprise that servant, come at an unexpected time, and then beat that servant and cut him in pieces.

(Our house Bible may be a little severe in its translation at this point. The Message Translation says, the master will "give him the thrashing of his life, and put him back into the kitchen peeling potatoes!")"

My wife and I kept a house like that once while I was in seminary. We spent our summers in a little town in Georgia where I served two churches. An elderly couple, Pike and Rose Hutchins, were friends of those churches and they let us use the second floor of their large home all summer. Our job was to keep up the house and the yard while they spent the summer at their vacation home in the mountains of north Georgia.

So Pike was our master and we were the servants. For Pike, keeping the house and yard meant watering his tomato plants. In fact, they told us that they would occasionally be returning on Fridays for a weekend visit primarily to pick tomatoes.

You have to understand about tomatoes grown in the southeast. They grow bigger than grapefruit. Their taste just off the vine is indescribable. I've often eaten a meal consisting of just one tomato freshly picked. Tomato devotees tell us that within 15 seconds after you slice one of those tomatoes the flavor starts to diminish.

I messed up the very first week we were in the Hutchin's house. It was a very busy week and I forgot to water the tomatoes. When I finally remembered, I ran out to look at the plants—six or eight of them all originally as tall as me. I was horrified. They had shriveled into almost nothing. And it was Friday morning. Pike was coming.

Now I have to tell you I felt awful. I hadn't done anything wrong. I hadn't done anything evil.

I hadn't done anything bad. That was the problem. I hadn't done anything. I knew exactly what to do and I hadn't done it. This is precisely Jesus' point in the parable. You know what to do—do it! Act now while you have time! You will not always have time.

Well, I knew it would be too little too late but I flooded the plants with water anyway. It was all I could do. And then I awaited my fate.

That afternoon Pike and Rose pulled into the backyard. Sure enough the first thing Pike did was go to visit his tomato plants. Then Pike approached the house. What was I going to say? I let Pike speak first. He said, "Sim, Thanks for taking good care of the tomatoes." And he wasn't joking. I couldn't believe it!

I discovered something about tomato plants that day. If they haven't completely died from dehydration, tomato plants can revive quickly as these did. In just hours those plants had become green and lush and healthy—full of baby tomatoes just waiting to become big and red and juicy. Pike was a kind and generous man. He shared those tomatoes with us all summer.

Jesus sums up these verses by saying it's actually like a thief in the night. A thief comes at a time we least expect or else we would be ready. There'll be no time to water the tomatoes. Jesus then makes a statement that's the nut kernel—the core—of this whole passage. It's verse 40.

He says, "*You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.*"

Am I ready? Are you ready?

Of course you and I say what this guy says in the parable, "My master is delayed in coming." Only we say it like this: "Look, it's been over 2,000 years and Jesus hasn't returned yet. I think I've got at least a couple of days to work on this before Jesus CHECKS IN or two months anyway 'cause It's exactly two months from today when the Mayan Calendar gives out on December 21.

That may be, but how long do we have before we CHECK OUT? None of us knows. We may say, "Well, I'll work on this tomorrow."

The Scriptures say, "*Why, you don't even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes away.*" (James 4:14)

I like these words from the common folk of the United Kingdom. They are most to the point. They are inscribed on a clock tower in a little town near London. I've quoted them before.

"When I was a child and romped at will; time stood still.

Then as a boy I laughed and talked; time walked.

When I became a man, time ran.

Now that I am grown, time has flown.

Soon time will be gone.

Will Christ have saved my soul?"

The point is you and I do have today—this moment. It is the only moment we can be sure we possess. This is the moment to act.

Don't wait until the moment possesses you, a moment like the poet describes who wrote of the man whose soul was saved just before being thrown from a galloping horse.

"Between the stirrup and the ground, mercy I asked, and mercy I found."

Don't wait for that. We never know how much time we'll have between the stirrup and the ground.

And what is this mercy this man found? How do we get ready to meet our God?

The Bible tells us this story:

Let my right hand represent God and my left hand the human race.

In the beginning God created the human race and he embraced humankind just as I'm embracing my left hand within my right hand. We were made for Him. Everything about us is designed to fit into this beautiful, loving, joyful, harmonious relationship with God. Everything was perfect. And then something terrible happened.

You may not accept the Adam and Eve story, but you have to accept that early on there was a rupture, a break, a breach in this relationship. It all had to do with a new element that had entered the scene and the heart of everything human. It resisted the goodness of God and his authority and the human race embraced it. The Bible calls it Sin. I'm not referring here to the plural word sins. I'm referring to Sin. That's "Sin"—singular and with a capital "S".

Oswald Chamber's says an interesting thing here. He says "other religions deal with sins; the Bible alone deals with Sin." He calls it the heredity of Sin. It's something we are all born with yet we each embrace it, own it, and allow it to operate in our lives such that it produces the sins we are responsible for.

This Sin caused a split between God and the human race just as I have separated my hands. That's because the Sin nature of human-kind cannot exist within the embrace of a Holy God. Just as sometimes a mother's body carrying an embryo with an opposing blood type will without medical intervention reject the developing baby—a baby the mother may love with all her heart. So God's whole being rejects the human race though His love for each of us is infinite.

My left hand down here represents the human race and my right hand up here represents God. We are all born down here—apart from God. We all have a built-in longing for God—to be in relationship with him. Yet, if this gap is not closed before we die we enter an eternity apart from the God we were made for—an eternity that is an eternal existence but not eternal life. It's an eternity without any reference point because God is the ultimate reference point for everything.

Jesus told this parable because He wants us to be with Him forever. He knows there'll be no chance after this life to close that gap for as the Scriptures tell us, *"It is appointed for us to die once and after that the judgement."* (Heb. 9:27) So he's saying whatever you do, don't put off getting ready. Do it now!

And getting ready to meet God means closing this gap. How to close this gap is the central message of the Bible. I remember once reading a survey taken among young adults who had dropped out of church as to what they thought of the church. Several of them had collectively written their opinion. They said, "Church is a bunch of old people cramming for finals."

I smiled at that but I was also saddened that these young people seemed to have missed the central message of the Bible. Their thinking was that if we do enough good we can overcome all the bad we've done and close that gap. That would be like climbing a ladder back to God—a ladder back to perfection. That's impossible!

No matter how many sins we overcome we cannot overcome our Sin nature by any human effort. We are as lost as a person who has fallen overboard at sea and who cannot swim. That person doesn't need someone to throw a book at them on how to swim. That person needs a Savior.

The Bible is not a book God has thrown at us on how to climb the ladder back to Him. Various attempts to climb back to God define all the religions of the world apart from the Christian Faith. No, the Bible is a book that tells us God has come down to us. He has come in the flesh—a baby born in Bethlehem—to be our Savior.

He has come to bring us back home to God. The moment we receive Jesus Christ into our lives we receive eternal life—a life we experience now but will experience in its fullness in the life beyond. In that moment we receive him, Jesus becomes our Savior and we come home to God just like I'm bringing my hands back together. This is truly the most beautiful story ever told, but it was a costly story—costly to God.

Jesus was born to die. The Scriptures tell us that "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin." (Hebrews 9:22b) No mere human is good enough to be that sacrifice—only Jesus, who was God in the flesh. So on a cruel cross 2000 years ago

Jesus Christ, who had no sin of His own, took upon Himself the sins of the whole human race. The prophet, Isaiah, says it clearly: *"We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all."* (Isaiah 53:5,6)

A song we sing says it so well:
"Till on that cross as Jesus died,
The wrath of God was satisfied.
For every sin on Him was laid;
Here in the death of Christ I live.

No power of hell, no scheme of man,
Can ever pluck me from his hand.
Till He returns or calls me home,
Here in the power of Christ I stand."

That song's title, "In Christ Alone", says it all. Only in Jesus Christ can our sins be forgiven, and only through Him can we be brought back into a relationship with God. Jesus said, *"No one comes to the Father except through Me."* (John 14:6b)

An elder in a church where I served called me one day to come over to his home. He had some urgent business he wanted me to help him with. As I made my way to his house I couldn't imagine how I could help this man.

He was an awesome person. His authority on the Session of the church was well known. When he spoke everybody listened. He was well-to-do, but wise and he had a lot of character. He was retired. At one time he had been on the short list to become the CEO of one of the largest corporations in our country—maybe in the world—but his bad health kept that from happening. His question was simply, "How can I get closer to God?"

Knowing what I did about this man I realized what he was really asking me and I was right. He wanted me to help him prepare to meet God.

I said, "Ted (not his real name) I'm going to share with you something very simple but it's also profound." As I recall, we got out his Bible and I had him read Revelation 3:20. I reminded him it was Jesus speaking: *"Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you and you with me."*

"I'm sure you know this verse?" I asked. He did. He was very familiar with it. I asked what the verse said one had to do in order for Jesus to come in. He said, "open the door". I reminded him that the door is the door to our heart. He understood that. I said, "Ted, have you ever done that, have you ever opened the door of your heart and asked Jesus to come in?" He said, "No, I never have." Amazing! This prince of a guy knew what to do, but he had never done it.

Before I left that day I asked Ted to say a prayer that night before he went to sleep telling Jesus the door of his heart was open and asking Jesus to come in. When I think about it, it was like telling him to say that prayer we sing in the chorus of a Christmas song. The words are "Come into my heart Lord Jesus, there is room in my heart for You."

That was one of the last times I ever spoke with Ted. I wish I had gone back and asked him if he had said that prayer. I've learned since that it's important to tell someone you've prayed that prayer. Good things happen when you do.

Praying that prayer sincerely is the way we prepare to meet God,

because praying that prayer means receiving Jesus Christ and He alone is "the only name under heaven whereby we must be saved." (Acts 4:12)

I'll end with another story. I've never told this story publicly—only to a few people. But I have felt a definite nudging by God's Spirit to share it, so I think there may be someone here who needs to hear it. It's the only time God has spoken to me audibly.

Peter—good old Peter—speaks up in the middle of this parable and says, "Lord, are you telling this parable for us or for everyone?" A good question. Let me paraphrase it. "Lord, what about us who've already opened our lives to You, is there a word here for us too? Do we need to be prepared?"

If you were to boil down to two words what Jesus says next, those words would be, "You bet!"

It was about 13 or 14 years ago that my favorite dog of all dogs died. She was the kind of dog that supposed to live to be 15 or 16 years old but she became sick and died at 8 years old. I was devastated. One day after I got her all buried in our back yard and the dust settled, I totally lost it.

I got in my car and I took off. I didn't care what day it was, who was waiting for me at work or whether anybody knew where I was or not. I didn't even know where I was. I was somewhere on the back roads of Kentucky. I drove for an hour until the road gave out and I was up against an old fence at the end of a dirt road looking out on a big field in the middle of nowhere.

I felt mad at everybody, God included. It was when I had just about decided that I would probably sit there indefinitely when

I heard the voice. It was clear and commanding. It did not originate from outside my ears but it went through all the inner workings. It was audible. It was high definition. It was real. "Sim, get off your okole and get moving! There's work to do!"

Man alive! Talk about somebody jumping to it! I sat up so fast my head hit the ceiling. I spun those tires backing up and turning around, and I couldn't get out of there fast enough—dirt flying everywhere.

If someone had been watching from a distance they would have wondered, "What's gotten into that guy?" It was the Holy Spirit that had gotten into this guy. The Holy Spirit? The gentle Comforter? You bet! He's also called the Exhorter, and that day I was being exhorted. Only God's Spirit didn't use the word, "okole". Not that God didn't know Hawaiian but I didn't. However, I was soon to learn.

I dug into my work with a new zeal, and I was ready when a long distance phone call came inquiring about my interest in working at a church called First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu. And here I am!

In the book of Revelation we're told that in Heaven there will be no crying, no tears, no pain. It doesn't say there will be no shoots. What's a "shoot"? That's when you say, "Ah shoot! I thought I had time to get it done, but I didn't."

If you find yourself for whatever reason slouching in your walk with Christ. This word may be for you. Get off your okole! God has work for you to do! Tell him you are ready. He'll take care of the rest.

Let's pray.

As we bow before God, I'm going to give you two brief prayers to pray. I'm not going to ask for a show of hands. However, these are prayers of commitment.

The first prayer: If you at this moment want to open your heart to Jesus Christ and you have never done so, please pray silently this Christmas prayer:

Come into my heart Lord Jesus. There is room in my heart for you.

The second prayer: If you feel God is speaking to you to get off your okole, please pray silently this okole prayer.

Lord Jesus, I am getting off my okole. Please guide me. I am listening.

Our Lord we offer these prayers in Jesus' name. Amen.

Please note: The Sunday sermon texts are also available at fpchawaii.org. The audio version can be down-loaded from iTunes or from fpc.posterous.com. It can also be sent to you by e-mail. You may request the free audio version at: fpchkoolau@gmail.com