

Genesis 15:1-6

Psalm 33:12-22

Hebrews 11:1-3

Luke 12:32-40

Sermon for August 14, 2022

THE MUSIC INSTRUCTOR

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: Let us praise God with singing.

In our Gospel selection for today, Luke records an occasion in which Jesus is stressing the urgency of accepting his instruction:

Let your waist be girded and your lamps be burning; and you yourselves be like men who wait for their master, when he returns from the wedding that when he comes and knocks they may open to him immediately.

Elsewhere in Luke and in the other Gospels we in fact find many examples of things Jesus said which all emphasize the importance of beginning now, getting the new life underway, rather than putting it off. The Virgins waiting for the bridegroom must full their lamps *now*, before it's too late; the rich man must lay up his treasures in heaven *now*, before death catches him unawares. And so on.

Many of the early Christian writers like Luke, writing decades after Christ's death, since Jesus had not yet fulfilled their expectation of a second coming, a return from heaven to complete the plan of salvation, took these recorded sayings of Jesus and interpreted them to be about being prepared for that second coming. Sometimes they even explicitly added something to the original saying to bolster that determination. So the final verse of our selection for today reads: *You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour*, although that was almost certainly not part of what Jesus actually said. And down through the centuries since that time, this has continued to be perhaps

the principle way of interpreting these various passages: Shape up or ship out to that very, very hot place forever.

But I think there's another way of reading this passage, a way that conforms much more comfortably to Christ's central message of forgiveness and the universal love of God for all his children. And I'd like to approach that suggestion – and in honor of our having Marcy with us here today – by sharing with you all a regret that I once shared with her, although she may not remember it.

My regret is not being a musician.

Why do I regret not being a musician? One thing you may have noticed about Marcy is that, wherever she goes, she seems to find herself engaged with other musicians, and those engagements lead to making music together, in one venue or another. That will never happen with me, and I regret that I will never be able to share those kinds of experiences.

Another way of putting it is that musicians are equipped to have a special kind of joy. You know what I'm talking about? Whenever you see a group of musicians performing together, they always seem to be having such a good time. Except for those who are blowing into a horn, they always seemed to be smiling, and they're all swaying their bodies a little bit, nodding to each other, coming together with a focused and intense satisfaction through sharing a sense of mutual accomplishment in the creation of something lovely and transient and completely without ulterior purpose beyond presenting, together, a gift of enjoyment to the world.

You see that same dynamic in action whether you're watching a professional jazz combo or a high school marching band or a bunch of grey bearded geriatrics rocking out Creedence Clearwater oldies alongside the Erie Canal in Albion, but it really first registered with me with tremendous poignancy on a special occasion long ago.

I happened to find myself spending one summer in Indianapolis, Indiana, and for reasons I won't go into, I was living in a rundown boarding house, renting a single room, a room just barely big enough to hold a bed and a TV, with the bathroom down the hall that everybody on the floor had to share. Except for myself, everyone else in the place was old or at least over-the-hill, and needless to say they were pretty much life losers, since nobody else except an addle-brained young drifter like myself would ever find himself in such an end-of-the-road place.

Anyway, the woman who owned the place would make sandwiches that you could buy from her over the front counter, and at suppertime, a few of us would buy a sandwich and eat it together sitting on chairs in the lobby, and so I got to know a few of the other tenants. One of them was a grizzled old fellow who had emigrated from Germany after the war, and he didn't speak English very well. Since I spoke a little German, we struck up an acquaintance, and spend a few evenings in conversation. I remember feeling very sorry for the guy, seemingly all alone, living in a crummy boarding house in a strange country, obviously without any money to speak of, and he was always sad and never seemed to want to say anything about himself, or how he had ended up here.

Long story short, one Saturday evening as we were having our cold sandwiches, he told me he would be playing in a park on Sunday, the next day. I thought maybe I had misunderstood his German, but he repeated it, and said I might want to come by, because there would be other people there. He wouldn't tell me anything else about it.

The next afternoon, I made my way to the park, which turned out to be one of the biggest parks in Indianapolis, and when I got there I heard music and I found a big crowd gathered, people sitting on blankets and lawn chairs. At the front of the crowd was a big amphitheater, and there was an orchestra set up there, and they were already playing.

I found a place to sit down and looked at the orchestra, and sure enough, there, in the front row, playing what looked to be third violin for the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra, was my friend from the boardinghouse. I studied him the whole time they played. It seemed to me that he had been transformed into a radiant angel, and I remember thinking then, *No matter how long I live, I'll never have an experience half so glorious as he's having right now.*

That evening, eating our sandwiches, I waited for him to tell me something more about himself, but all he asked me was whether I had enjoyed the afternoon and the music. I told him I would never forget it, and I never have.

A couple of days later, I left the boardinghouse.

What Jesus was being urgent about was not that people should get their lives in order after he had been crucified, resurrected, and had returned to heaven, so that they would be prepared for his eventual return, whenever that might be.

12:32 "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

12:33 Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys.

12:34 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

This is all instruction for ordering your life, and it is not urgent because Jesus might descend from the clouds and the world might end at any moment and you be rushed to judgment. That is not how his hearers would have taken it, and neither should we. Jesus is certainly filled with urgency, but he is urgent because we only have this one opportunity of preparing ourselves to lead the life of heaven, to find value in the things heaven values, and to lose interest in the things that heaven will not offer you.

Every human life has two ages. There is the present age, and there is the age to come. The present age is the life spent here on earth; the age to come is the life spent in heaven. The instruction Jesus offers is how to conduct ourselves in the present age in order to prepare ourselves for the age to come.

To human natures that find their sustenance and reward in dominating others, in being envied or feared, in frivolous and harmful pastimes, in prestige and honors and self-publicity, heaven will seem an unwelcome and unrewarding place.

This church adheres to a belief in the universal salvation of all humankind. All God's children go to heaven. But that doesn't mean that all God's children will find heaven an equally agreeable place to live. That will depend on the condition of the soul when it passes through the Pearly Gates.

What Christ accomplished through His resurrection and ascension was to prove the reality of the Kingdom of God, of the spiritual world where God reigns. What Christ came to *teach* was how, in this material world, to live lives that grasp and acknowledge what that spiritual reality means for us, so that we may begin, now, to accommodate ourselves to it.

What is the specific application of this to us? Well that will vary, of course, from Christian to Christian. Christ doesn't give us sets of specific rules; he gives us a yardstick by which we can measure ourselves. To what extent does the conscious awareness of the reality of God's presence illuminate and influence

the various elements of our daily lives? To what degree do we consult with God in making our decisions, whether large or small? How conscientiously do we express our gratitude to, how openly do we confess our failures before, how sharply do we experience our separation from Our Father when we disobey or go astray or harden our hearts against His love. These are things no one can judge for us, but which, as Christians, we must judge for ourselves. This is the beam we must acknowledge and remove from our own eyes. And the sooner the better.

Let me conclude by returning to the illustration with which we began our discussion. Suppose you're a loving parent with several children, and that you desire them to have the richest and happiest and most fulfilling lives possible. And suppose you knew that at the age of twenty, each of your children would be suddenly transported to a new and strange country to spend the rest of his or her adulthood. And suppose you knew that in this strange and new country, all positions of authority, all of society's comforts and privileges, and all opportunities for engaging in mutually satisfying relationships with the other citizens of that country were reserved exclusively for those who could play a musical instrument well. Everyone else, although they might still live in the country, would lead poor and fruitless and boring and lonely lives, until they themselves entered into the spirit and culture of their new home, and learned to play an instrument. What would you do?

My guess is that you would start sending them to piano lessons, or drum lessons, or tuba lessons, or singing lessons...and the sooner the better.

We are all of us God's children, and Jesus is our music instructor.

And so our prayer for today, heavenly Father, is that, however old we may be in earthly years, we may enroll in the Christian Academy, and begin to acquire or to develop the talents that will enable us to find the fullest peace and joy and reward in the Kingdom of Your Son and our Lord, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.