

SCRIPTURE LESSON: Luke 12:32-34
SERMON TITLE: Giving Without Fear

This is a summary of the latest economic news from last Friday published by MSNBC.com: *The latest economic data provide mounting evidence that the collapse of the housing market and turmoil in the financial markets have tipped the U. S. economy into recession. The question now on the minds of consumers, business owners and politicians: How deep is it going to be, and how long is it going to last?*

This week's report showing a 0.3 percent decline in gross domestic product confirmed that the economy has shifted into reverse. With job losses rising, and consumer confidence falling to levels not seen in decades, the reversal appears to be picking up speed...

"This is going to be a long, protracted retrenchment," said former Fed Gov. Lawrence Lindsey. "The key is going to be (that) consumers have no choice but to cut back."¹

It sounds to me like there's a lot going on economically that can make people afraid. But did you hear what Jesus said: *Do not be afraid, little flock.* Jesus is speaking to his disciples—his *little flock*—*Do not be afraid.*

The context is important here--over the preceding verses, Jesus has told a parable warning against greed: *"Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."*

Jesus has also counseled his disciples: *And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.*

¹ Schoen, John W. "Economic downturn may be picking up speed." MSNBC Business. 31 Nov. 2008. 31 Nov. 2008 <www.msnbc.msn.com>.

And then we come to verse 32: ***Do not be afraid.*** The fear that Jesus addresses here is an economic fear—its fear connected to our possessions—to our purses—to our treasure. It's a fear of not having enough.

And somehow or another, this fear is connected to the kingdom of God. Are we afraid that as the kingdom comes, God will not provide for our most basic needs? Are we afraid that even as we strive for the kingdom, God will fail us and leave us in want? I know these fears.

But look at what Jesus says: ***Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.*** The kingdom is in our midst. God's rule is taking root on earth. This is what the coming of Jesus Christ is all about! God's will being done on earth as it is in heaven! And as we yield to God's kingdom—by sharing freely and generously with one another—even to the point of selling possessions and giving to the poor—the promise is that our basic needs will be met—we'll make purses for ourselves that don't wear out—we'll store up unfailing treasure in heaven—and our hearts will finally be where God longs for them to be.

But the question is: Is the kingdom trustworthy? Especially when the economy is on the slide, is God trustworthy? The interesting thing about these questions is that they can only be answered by taking a risk and trusting God--which is exactly what one congregation decided to do.

At one time in it's past, the Corpus Christi Catholic Church worshipped about 5,000 each Sunday morning. In recent years, however, church attendance declined to about 200. And the parishioners were afraid. The diocese was actually talking about closing the parish.

The parish priest, Father James Callan, wrote these words about the church's predicament: *What do you do when your church is dying? You would think that the answer*

would be to preserve it, to hang on to it, to protect it. No! Just the opposite. Let it go. Share what little you have. Reach out to the poor. Give it away before you get it. Take a chance.

This is what the church did: First of all, they gave away 10 percent of every offering to the poor. Again the pastor writes: *To the poor? Weren't we the poor? In some ways we were. That January, the gas and electric bill for one month was over \$10,000. The collection each week was \$450.00.*

Some quick math tells you we were in trouble. So why would we want to give away 10% of our small collection when we ourselves were suffering? Simply because other people in the world were worse off than we were. At least we were eating every day. Anyway, we thought that Jesus would feel more at home in a church that was generous with the needy.

The second radical step we took was to eliminate all of our investments. We decided to sell our stocks and bonds, to empty our portfolio, and to give the money to the poor. This way we would have nothing to depend on except God and the generosity of the parishioners.

Along with these financial steps, the church also turned its attention to reaching out personally to those in need. Father Callan reports these results: *The Sunday attendance went from 200 to 2,200. Babies are crying again in church. We're alive again! . . . Corpus Christi started to experience a new springtime when we let go and took some chances. . . . We discovered that faith meant leaving something behind and reaching out for something not yet tangible.*²

My brothers and sisters, in these stressful economic times, why be afraid? God is trustworthy and it's God's good pleasure to give us the kingdom. Not a bad thought to keep in mind as we come to Consecration Sunday next week.

² Callan, Father James. "Let go and step out in faith." Salt of the Earth. 31 Nov. 2008 <<http://salt.claretianpubs.org>>.

