

October 1, 2023 World Communion Sunday

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church

Luke 12:13-21

"Resilience: You Cannot Control Your Life"

Douglas T. King

I was a weird little kid. For those of you who know me well that is probably not that big a surprise. One of the multitude of ways I was weird was how I managed my candy. Most children, given the chance, will finish all of the candy before them in short order. I used to parse it out very carefully. My goal was to have my Halloween candy last until Christmas, my Christmas candy last until Easter, and my Easter candy last until my birthday in July. I think sometimes I got more pleasure out of the challenge of controlling and rationing the candy than I did in the candy itself.

Today is the fourth in a sermon series on the Biblical case for resiliency. The four traits of resiliency we are considering are as follows: number one, practice mindfulness; number two, every setback offers a transformation; number three, find humor in everything. And today we are discussing the fourth and final trait of resiliency, do not try to control your life. Let's figure out how we can save me from myself, shall we?

In the original Hebrew of the Old Testament only God acts in the present tense. All human action is portrayed in either past or future tenses. I find that bit of grammar trivia a very compelling and convicting window into how I live my life. I am ever, either reliving what has happened in the past and questioning my choices and actions or rehearsing and planning

for what the future may be. I would dearly love to be able to go back and tinker with what I have done before; to rewrite my personal history and therefore somehow rewrite a host of conclusions. And, of course I would love to be able to plan in such a way as to have my personal preferences for the future become the actual future. All of this anxious scheming allows little time to actually be present in the present where the divine is active and at work.

Now, I do not claim that everyone is as neurotic as I am but I do think there is some of this in each of us; that some of this hunger to control outcomes is inherent in our fallen human condition. And why wouldn't it be? But a very good argument could be made that if we actually had the ability to control all of our outcomes that we would mess things up in a major way. Perhaps thankfully, we do not have that kind of power. As they say, be careful for what you wish.

In our text this morning from Luke, Jesus tells a story of a rich man who stores up his abundance and is questioned for it and how we should emulate ravens and lilies, living in the moment, receiving what they need. It is almost as if Jesus is giving a rebuttal to Aesop's fable of the ant and the grasshopper. Ignore all of that protestant work ethic stuff. Industriousness, frugality, Forget about all of it.

No, I do not really think that is Jesus' point in all of this. What we are being driven to hear is that self-sufficiency is an illusion. No matter how many barns you build and fill with grain you can never stand on your own without need. If indeed, this very night your life is demanded of you all the planning and preparing in the world will not prevent that from happening. If we idolize our ability to insure ourselves

against the vagaries of the world we are deluding ourselves, and when something occurs in our lives that is beyond our control we will be devastated, with nowhere to turn.

The reality is for all we do to protect and insulate ourselves, at some point our life things will occur that will be beyond our control, including dying. Nothing we can do will prevent that day from eventually coming to us one and all. And we are living in the midst of an illusion if we think bigger barns stored with more grain will protect us from all things.

Robert Farrar Capon describes the rich man like this, "as the paradigm of our whole plausible, reasonable, right-handed, wrong-headed struggle to be masters of an operation that is radically out of control—to be captains of a ship that, all our life long, has been taking on water faster than we can bail."

Perhaps he is a little dramatic but he is not wrong. If we do not recognize our situation we are ill prepared for the surprise challenges of this life. But if we can recognize our reality, our mortality, our dependence. If we can recognize our dependence upon God and upon each other we have ways in which to respond to the unexpected circumstances and tragedies of this life. We will have known all along that we have needed God and thus God will not be a stranger to us when we are most in need of the divine presence. And if we have recognized the inherent interdependence we have with each other and have been generous with those around us we can be brave enough to receive the generosity of others when we need it most.

When we find ourselves staring face to face with something we do not have the singular power to overcome, the fantasy of self-sufficiency is crippling. Even good things like saving for a rainy day can become detrimental to us if we overvalue what

they truly mean. If we place our ultimate protection in a stock portfolio, a shaky day in the market can leave us with no place to turn. We can become obsessed with what we possess and not to whom we belong, our God.

This fourth element of resiliency is the most important one. The first three all have their place, mindfulness, transformation, humor. But the fourth and final trait of resiliency, do not try to control your life, is the lynchpin. Of course, I might tweak the wording some. I might define it as "remember who controls the outcome of your life."

When we stand steadfast in the knowledge that it is ultimately in God that we find our destination we are given the strength to respond to the greatest challenges of this life with the potential for hope. We can spend less time anxiously planning for a future beyond our control and more time focusing on the here and now where we can experience God's abiding presence. We can fail and still envision a way forward because God has promised each and every one us ultimate care. We can laugh at the absurdity of it all because of the knowledge of our ultimate outcome. We can indeed be resilient to whatever may come knowing that nothing can ever stop us from being the children of God.

On this World Communion Sunday as we come to the table this is worthy of remembrance. We come as guests invited. We are fed by God's hand. It is not we who create the feast. We are the grateful recipients of the gift. It is not our table. We are the ones freely offered a place at it. The promises offered here are not because of anything we have done in the past, or about what we are planning for the future. They come from the loving actions of Jesus Christ. We do not control this feast,

this table. It is bestowed upon us with grace. And this table is a symbol of our entire lives. All of it, a gift given in love and beyond our power to control.

So, ration your candy if you wish, but never forget the one who truly feeds you each and every day.

Thanks be to God. Amen.