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Date: July 3, 2022
Sermon: "To Whom Much Is Given . . ."
Scripture: Luke 12:47-48
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

Luke 12:47-48

That slave, who knew what his master wanted, but did not prepare himself or do what was wanted, will receive a severe beating. But one who did not know and did what deserved a beating will receive a light beating. From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.

Sermon: "To Whom Much Is Given . . ." David Johnson Rowe

You're lucky I didn't have all of Luke Chapter 12 read. It's a tough chapter. Warnings about division. Parables about rich fools who care only about persecutions and about being prepared . . . or else.

Jesus rips apart hypocrisy and injustice. And today's Scripture reminds us to be serious about our privilege, to recognize our responsibilities, to take advantage of our opportunities. The old way of saying the key verse is "To whom much is given, much will be required." *To whom much is given, much will be required.*

To say we are privileged has a lot of baggage nowadays, but it's not always a bad word. I'll say proudly, I'm "privileged," to be Pastor of this Church. There are 380,000 churches in America. That means 379,000 clergy are not Pastors of this Church. But I'm here. I'm lucky. I love it. I'm privileged. I'm blessed.

All Jesus is saying is "Count your blessings, make the most of them." Actually, Jesus is a bit sterner: "Count your blessings, you'd better make the most of them!"

"To whom much is given, much will be required." You know, that's a pretty basic idea, nothing radical about it. We expect this of one another all the time. Think of your own parenting style or your growing up or your business lives, coaching, mentoring: "Do your best!" We've said it all the time. It has been said to us all

the time. "Do your best!" Or more critically, "You're not living up to your potential." "You're better than that!" "Don't settle for less."

And yet, this is not quite an egalitarian verse. Jesus is stating the obvious: some people have a leg up. It might be wealth or opportunity or blind luck or your DNA or your location or family or school or certain traits. Let's just admit it, we have a leg up. We have an advantage.

The shame isn't in having it. The shame is in not recognizing it. Jesus emphasized this to his own people, his own nation, his own friends. Being Jewish, in Israel, what he taught and did was pointed at Jewish people. They were his testing ground. His central group. His experiments in human spiritual transformation. He said to them all, "To whom much is given, much will be required." He said the same to the Pharisees, the religious leaders, and to the Roman authorities, to those in power and influence, "You're better than that! Do your best. Maximize your potential."

And he expected the same from those closest to him. To the Disciples, his inner circle, he said, "To whom much is given, much will be required." Then he made the ring tighter. Jesus had three favorite Disciples; he kept singling them out. Jesus made it clear to them: "To whom much is given, much will be required." Jesus was sometimes pointing right at Peter and John, sometimes right at all 12 Disciples or right at Mary Magdalene and his family, right at Jewish leaders and Roman authorities, right at his own country.

In 1776 a new country gets born, us, America, and so we pull up that ancient verse and apply it to us. And I hope the French apply it to themselves. And the Paraguayans to themselves, and Russia, for Pete's sake, to themselves. Wherever you're from, whoever you are, is what you are doing the best you have to offer?

We are the "whom" to "whom much is given" and therefore we are the "whom" from "whom much will be required." "America the Beautiful" Is pretty much a full-throttled endorsement of how blessed we are to be Americans. There are two little hints of warning in there when we sing, "May God thy gold refine" and "God mend thine every flaw." They remind us that America has flaws and can always use refining. But still, the "spacious skies," the "waves of grain," the "fruited plain," the "heroes . . . liberating," the "mercy and nobleness," the "patriot dream," and "cities gleam"—We love it!

There's another hymn that is a nice and gentle reminder that says, you know, there are other nations out there on whom the sun shines brightly too; and their skies are blue too; and they have "waves of grain," "fruited plains," "mountain majesties" and "gleaming cities," and their citizens love it too.

True enough. But July 4th weekend is for us, America; it's our founding, our revolution, our roots. It's who we are *and* where we are. So today, we take Jesus's 2,000-year-old statement and apply it to America: "To whom much is given, much will be required."

This sermon is not a critique; we do a pretty good job here facing our problems, always. You've read my endless essays on America in general, on racism in particular. We've had programs on anti-Semitism, bullying. We tackle mental health and addiction; we've stood for human rights across the board. We work to overcome poverty, inequity, injustice. Our heads aren't buried in the sand. Today's sermon is the other side of the coin, an honest appraisal that, hey, we've got a lot to offer. We have a lot in our favor; we have a lot going for us.

What Jesus seems to be saying is it isn't what you've got; it's what you do with it. We all know people who inherited wealth and wasted it. We all know businesses that had a great idea and drove it into the ground. We all know athletes who had it all and partied it away. We all know tremendous talents in every field who never maximized their potential. Same is true for nations, civilizations, societies; and, yes, religions and churches.

Christianity, for example. Certainly across Europe and the Americas, Christianity was a major force, the power behind the throne, often the throne itself; influential; the heft of its wealth and land; intellectual, spiritual, artistic, cultural magnificence. But we've frittered it away. Congregationalism used to be a major player in New England, especially Connecticut. Now we are not. Why? We didn't live up to our potential. Society decided they could do without us in a major role. That's on us. We were "given much," but we didn't use it well.

Back to America. The "America the Beautiful" hymn does a good job laying out our advantages, which I'll summarize as Resources and Values. When we sing about "fruited plains" and "mountain majesties," that implies that we are a place rich in resources. Whatever a nation would want under its feet and all around us, we have it in spades. We can grow anything. We can make anything. We can find anything. And when it comes to "resources," Jesus's verse is 100 percent true—that was all "given" to us. We didn't make any of it. But it is ours to manage. Thus, Jesus would say, "To whom all those resources are given," you, then, are required, expected to manage it really, really well.

In today's world, everything is political: left/right, red/blue. How we've allowed our resources, our environment, our "much that has been given" to get politicized is beyond me. God was telling us to be good stewards, good trustees, and good caretakers of our resources long before there were political parties or an America.

From the Book of Genesis and the story of creation to today's Scripture from Jesus, we are told by God, "I've given you everything you need, and it is good, and you're in charge. And to whom much is given, much is required." So do it right.

The other big "given" is freedom. This country has fled for freedom, bled for freedom, died for freedom, spent for freedom. Even in the Black/White divide in America, our histories are joined by freedom: freedom lost, freedom won, being denied freedom, fighting for freedom. And I know we are all horrified by what's happening on our borders. And we may be horrified by different aspects of it, but the main driver of immigration, all the way back, is the yearning for freedom.

Remember Norman Rockwell's "Four Freedoms"? We've displayed them here. My friend Dan is a docent at the Rockwell Museum, and he explained them to us: Freedom of Speech. Freedom of Worship. Freedom from Want. Freedom from Fear.

Even in our dark history, America is bound together by freedom. For Native Americans, who lost it. For Africans who had it stolen from them. For immigrants who pursued it. Freedom explains the lingering hurts *and* the ongoing pride. Freedom is that precious. It is central throughout our Scriptures.

Christians and Jews alike embrace the story of Moses leading the Israelites out of slavery as a foundational story. God wants us free. And theologically, Christianity emphasizes freedom from sin, freedom from death. God wants us unburdened by any oppression from without or within. What I'm saying today is that freedom is the key value that enables all our values to be treasured. These freedoms, these values, these resources are the "much we have been given."

The end phrase, "much will be required," that's daunting, isn't it? Jesus is saying flat out, "You're going to be given chances, plenty of chances, to use your resources, to maximize your potential, to fulfill what is required."

The Ukraine War is one current example. There's an old saying, "Lead, follow, or get out of the way." What is America's responsibility when a genocide of war crimes against the innocent is happening live on our TV screens every day by a modern-day evil? The easiest path is to "get out of the way." It takes some gumption to follow. But to lead—that's hard and risky.

On July 4, on Veterans Day, on Martin Luther King Day, we honor citizens and soldiers who led when it wasn't easy, when it wasn't safe, and when it wasn't popular. Years ago, I required all teenagers in my youth group to bring their report cards to me. Long before helicopter parents, I was a helicopter pastor.

One teen's report card averaged 62. 62. She was capable of more, and I demanded more. Not A's and B's, but she was plenty better than the 58s and 64s that averaged out to 62. So I rode her hard, checked her work, pushed her, until she finally got the C's she was capable of. I was proud of her. She was proud of herself. Her parents were proud.

America doesn't have a C ceiling. We have been given so much, and therefore God rightly demands so much. We are a straight A, 4.0 capability country. We are a 1560 SAT; a three-set semifinalist win at Wimbledon, 6-4, 6-2, 6-0. We are a 2-handicap golfer at Augusta. We are shortlisted, nominated, in the hunt for the Pulitzer, the Tony, the Booker, the Oscar. We are Aaron Judge. We're good. Yet, we haven't won it all. But we have the capability. We have the opportunity. We have been given much.

When I see all the silliness in America, all the things that make your head spin, your eyes roll, your stomach turn, and I don't care if you're on the right or the left, you have a full list of such things—but they don't make me angry. They make me want to shout out loud, "We are better than that! Come on, we know it, don't settle for less, let's fulfill our potential."

"To whom much is given, much is required." Let's be proud of that; let's accept the challenge.

Our closing hymn today is the "Northfield Benediction."

A Benediction is a blessing, usually given by the pastor to the congregation. This summer, we will end each service by blessing one another, using the "Northfield Benediction." David attended the Northfield-Mount Herman School, founded by American Evangelist D. L. Moody. The Northfield Benediction is part of the musical tradition of that school, and based on the familiar Scripture of benediction in Numbers 6:24-26. Let's treasure this mutual blessing.

*"The Lord bless thee and keep thee,
The Lord make His face shine upon thee,
and be gracious unto thee,
And be gracious unto thee;
The Lord lift up his countenance,
His countenance upon thee,
and give thee peace!"*