

Our scripture in the gospel of Luke today brings our attention to the center of Jesus’ ministry to restore Israel. The front lines of this restoration revolution are 12 chosen disciples/apostles. The 12 will seek to follow, live, teach, and share the divine will of God with all. The part of chapter 6 we pick up is known as Jesus’ Sermon on the Plain that serves to identify and develop a vision of the new world with new behaviors that Jesus proclaims and introduces. These instructions from Jesus to the Disciples are guidance for a fulfilling life, and they are grounded on the affirmation of God as merciful and gracious; therefore, they are to be merciful and gracious in their own lives.

Read Luke 6:20-38

Where else do you encounter promises and guidance such as these blessings and woes? Where else might you be called to love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you? Where else are we charged to give and do to others as you would have them do to you? Where else are we instructed to be merciful and not judge nor condemn? Where else can we find great rewards to be called children of the Most High, be forgiven, and have our cup running over in our lap?

The answer: Nowhere else but with God!

It was the most outrageously expensive round-trip ticket ever sold, nearly ten thousand dollars to sail from England to America and back. In an era when the average working adult made six dollars per week, ten thousand dollars was unthinkable. But a handful of the mega-rich were more than ready to pay such an outlandish sum. In fact, there was less-than friendly competition to purchase the few First-Class tickets available. After all, this was no typical seafaring venture: it was the maiden voyage of the greatest ship ever built, the RMS Titanic.

In April 1912, the Titanic departed from Southampton, England, bound for New York City. She was an impressive sight, a vessel 882 feet long, the length of nearly 3 football fields. Her width was 92 feet and her eight decks rose to the height of an 11-story building. The Titanic had a double-bottomed hull, divided into sixteen watertight compartments. Because as many as four of these could be completely flooded without endangering the ship’s buoyancy, the Titanic was considered unsinkable.

On the fateful night of April 14, shortly before midnight, the great liner was steaming full-speed through foggy weather when it collided with a massive iceberg. The impact left the Titanic mortally wounded, a 300-foot gash ripped in her right side, five of her watertight compartments ruptured and engulfed. The ship thought unsinkable rapidly disappeared into the ice depths, claiming 1,513 lives. Although there were 2, 224 passengers aboard, the Titanic carried lifeboats for only half that number, and many of them rescued but a handful of people.

The list of victims included nearly all those who paid so handsomely for First-Class tickets. For them, there would be no round-trip excursion. The journey was over, and all the money in the world could not purchase their safety.

*The Titanic's owners boasted that their ship was unsinkable. To those who held round-trip tickets they promised safe passage and a guaranteed return. But it was a promise they couldn't keep, a guarantee they couldn't fulfill. What seemed like such a sure thing wasn't sure at all; and what appeared to be so safe was actually quite susceptible. The passengers had taken one look at that enormous liner and accepted the promises at face value, never imagining that their confidence would be so tragically shattered.**

As we hold on to these thoughts about the Titanic, I would like us to also consider the titanic sized cultural phenomenon of sports for just a moment. Have any of you seen the "There is no place like sports" commercials? They contain powerful images of dramatic and life-altering moments in sports that speak to the heart of what sports are and can do for people (strength, courage, hard work, commitment, achievement, purpose, drive). As the images come across the screen, questions are asked in relationship to each image...

Where else can one person make millions feel less alone?

Where else is an injury just the beginning?

Where else are mountains no match for a 10-year-old?

Where else is standing up the bravest thing you can do?

Where else does a walk on become an mvp?

Where else is everything possible?

Where else do we finally discover who we can be?

Where else is the other team on your team?

Where else do you go the distance and then keep going and going?

Where else is a fighting chance all you need?

Where else do old traditions feel new again?

Where else does the story get better every year?

Where else do we believe in high flying courage?

Where else can we all find something to believe in?

Where else do we show up no matter what?

Where else can you rewrite history in only 10 seconds?

Where else can you always get off the mat?

Where else is it never too early for gold?

Where else does once in a lifetime happen all the time?

Where else do strangers become family?

Where else do we all share a hero?

Where else do we all dream the same dream?

Where else is there a seat for everyone?

ESPN declares, 'There is no place like sports.' This tag line and these commercials help entice us to participate and invest and engage. For all of those benefits, who wouldn't want to? As an avid sports fan and true believer in the good of sports, I agree that sports can be any and all of these things, (and by the looks of the hundreds of millions of others who flock to sporting events they do too)... but I have also been around long enough, and a part of sports at deep enough levels to also know that sports themselves (or the individual athletes or teams we root for) cannot promise or guarantee these things to be reality any more than the *Titanic* was unsinkable. They happen sometimes for some people in some places and those moments are magical, but do we consider at the very same time that they don't happen for others in other places.

This is not to say we can't go on dream trips and travel or have our favorite teams and cheer them on, but the danger is throughout life, we can become flipped around and find ourselves backwards. We end up in times and seasons in which we are trapped by the culture around us, and we begin to buy in and believe in the things of this world. We live by their principles and put our trust and our energy and our confidence and allegiance into our favorite team or dream trip and will do anything for them.

Life is more like a moving iceberg than a firm bedrock. It's constantly shifting, ever altering, and things are often different from what they appear. There are 'sure' promises that can't be fulfilled, 'absolute' certainties that turn out to be very, very uncertain. There are 'positive' investments that never pay off, 'stable' opportunities that degenerate into instability. So, what's a person to do? Where do we put our confidence? Whom do we trust? The starting point is to realize that the strength of a promise is dependent upon the source of the promise; (...) and the only ones with real weight are those from God.

"Give, and it will be given to you, a good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."

This is a principle that transcends time and place and circumstances. It is always true. If you give, it will be given to you. And not just an equal exchange. The return will be overflowing, super-abundant, bigger and better.

What does this offer us today then? Well, not just today but everyday, it offers to us that partnering with God is a sensible investment. Spiritually speaking, there's virtually no risk but all reward. Better than a bond that's backed up by the full faith and credit of the US Government, any gift given for God's glory is backed by the infinite resources of the Bank of Heaven. Whether the gift is money or some other form of contribution, God keeps perfect records. God's promise is backed by God's word, and it's truly worth the Book it's written in. Give in God's name and you will be blessed accordingly. There is no doubt about it, no cause for concern, no conditions under which the return is held back or held up.*

The real truth is there is a place all of what ESPN stands firmly on happen? With God! How? I believe it is through the church, you and me and our brothers and sisters down the street and around the world, who like the disciples/apostles listening to Jesus Sermon on the Plain, are to follow, live, teach, and share God's divine will. It is with God that one person, the Holy Spirit, can make millions feel less alone, make everything possible, give all something to believe in, and help strangers become family. It is with God, through Jesus, that we witness an injury (death) be just the beginning, learn that standing up is the bravest thing you can do, the other team is on your team (Jews and Gentiles), and there is a seat at the table for everyone. It is with God, you all, that we discover who we truly are, walk ons become mvp's, 10-year-olds conquer mountains, and it is never too early for gold (heaven). With God, the promises are sure and dependable, worth our every investment and effort.

Where else? With God (...), not us or elements of this world! Our most valued hopes and dreams and investments are best placed with faith in God. In Matthew 6:33 we discover Jesus teaching, "Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things (the essentials of fulfilling life) shall be added unto you."

*excerpt from "The 33 Laws of Stewardship: Principles for a Live of True Fulfillment" by Sutherland and Nowery