

In today's gospel reading, we are given two pretty relatable stories about reasonable people trying to be prudent with money . . . so of course Jesus challenges their basic assumptions and throws everyone into a tizzy. The man who wants him to settle an inheritance dispute with his brother has no back story. We don't know who's being greedy or what the degree of hardship might be. And Jesus doesn't care. He just says he's not an arbitrator over them, and warns the crowd against greed. The second story is one that Jesus himself tells, about a rich man whose land produced so abundantly that he literally had no place to put the harvest, so he decided to build another barn, and enjoyed anticipating the pleasant, relaxed life he would lead with so much wealth. BUT that night he died, and he never got to enjoy the wealth.

Okay, that's kind of anxiety-producing. As if life weren't scary enough already, now we have to remember that our lives could end at any minute. But I think Jesus is actually not trying to make us more afraid, but is trying to make us less afraid—trying to turn our attention from all the reasons we should worry to all the reasons we should rejoice. Because now he tells the crowd, "Consider the ravens, who don't work or store up food, but God feeds them. Consider the lilies, more beautiful than any robe Solomon ever wore, but God treasures you even more than God treasures the lilies." "Your Father knows that you need [these things]. Strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well." Jesus is saying that the life that God gives us is *not* something where we have to worry about getting it right or anticipating what's going to happen. The only real world in which we live is the kingdom of God. <https://www.faithandleadership.com/catherine-caimano->

[very-day-our-lives-are-being-demanded](#) And God's dream for us is that we live to discover that there is so much more that we're here for.

This reminds me of the character of Fr. Zossima in *The Brothers Karamazov*, who is sort of the saint/sage of the story. He recounts his early life, in which he was a soldier besotted with a beautiful young woman. After some time he learned that she was engaged to someone else quite his social superior, and he felt humiliated and embarrassed to think that she had known he was courting her and had probably laughed at his presumption and ignorance. Embarrassment made him angry, and he contrived a situation in which her fiancé was compelled to meet him in a duel. In this way he thought he would kill his rival and wrest back his self-respect. The night before the duel he lost his temper and hit his manservant. When he woke up on the day of the duel he had an epiphany. He saw clearly that he, his manservant, and his rival were all simply men, none better or worse or less deserving than the other. He begged his servant's forgiveness and he threw the duel. Reproached by his rival and his own seconds, he said,

Gentlemen, look around you at the gifts of God, the clear sky, the pure air, the tender grass, the birds; nature is beautiful and sinless, and we, only we, are sinful and foolish, and we don't understand that life is heaven, for we have only to understand that and it will at once be fulfilled in all its beauty, we shall embrace each other and weep."

And he went into the monastery.

Father Zossima represents the insight that I think Jesus is offering. You are already worthwhile, God is already giving you countless gifts. You do not need to struggle for respect or legitimacy; you do not dwell in the land of scarcity. "We have only to understand that life is heaven and it will at once be fulfilled in all its beauty."

Huston Smith, the distinguished scholar of world religions, says something similar. His parents were Methodist missionaries, and he grew up to appreciate the religious traditions of people all over the world, and to write the important book *The World's Religions*. At the age of 91 he wrote another book, *Tales of Wonder, Adventures Chasing the Divine: An Autobiography*. At the end of the book, in the epilogue, he writes:

As my birthday nears, people are congratulating me as though I'd done something—run a marathon blindfolded, say. That may not be an entirely inaccurate description of reaching ninety, but never before have I been congratulated for doing nothing, or nothing more than continuing to breathe in and out. Behind the congratulations, though, I sometimes detect fears and a need for reassurance that it will be all right. The fears are real. And it will be all right.

Smith goes on to describe how he has had to move out of his beloved home with his wife and go live in an assisted living facility. “Religion relies on that successful plot device, the happy ending,” he writes, “but after my first night in the assisted living residence, I thought, the happy ending will have to wait until I am dead.”

Instead, after three days, it became all right. Ninety, he says, is a good age for making friends. The maintenance man, Mr. Lin, grew up in China, near where Huston Smith's family lived, and they have wonderful conversations. Smith decides that God has put him in this nursing home to cheer people up, and he does. One more excerpt:

In the dining room, the conversation can be minimal. I will use any topic to get the ball rolling: Mr. Lin told me today that in Chinese astrology this is the year of the rat.” The others at the table ask what that means, and soon everyone is free-associating about rats, and we're on our way. We're always on our way, if only we knew it.

... Gratitude—what I learned from the *roshi* at the Kyoto monastery half a lifetime ago. ... The day sings its song of small grace notes. In the bathroom or the elevator I whisper under my breath, “God, you are so good to me.” Thirty-five or forty times a day I say it. It seems I finally have a mantra. ... “God, you are so good to me.” After a lifetime of studying and teaching and writing, of investigating, deliberating, and philosophizing, of heaping qualification upon qualification, how simple it can finally become.

Dostoevsky with his fictional but compelling portrait of an arrogant young man, Huston Smith with his own story of being an old man losing yet another of his treasured gains—because old age sometimes seems to be one loss after another—both stories suggest that when there is nothing left, that’s when it is clear that God is giving us what we need and more. Near the end of a long life, Huston Smith writes that he is absolutely convinced of one thing: “We are in good hands.”

Let me say it again. Jesus is not trying to add to our fears or anxieties, but to alleviate them. When we ask ourselves, “Is this what God wants me to be?” it should not be out of guilt or fear of disappointing God, but because of our joyful belief that with God all things are possible. “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to *give you the kingdom.*” Love casts out fear, right, and when we are not afraid we are generous and joyful. That’s the testimony of the cloud of witnesses who have gone before us, for which be thankful.

Let us pray: Kind and generous One, cast out fear when it takes hold of us. Give us our own Huston Smith revelations, so that we see that you are calling us *and* that the places we are, are places of blessing. May all who suffer deprivation because of the fear and miserliness of others, be relieved of their suffering: clothed, fed, sheltered and schooled. Amen.