Today marks an anniversary, of sorts. Measured by the liturgical calendar, it was 3 years ago today that Linda and I first came to East Hampton to meet with the Pastor Nominating Committee, and I preached for them at Amagansett Presbyterian. So, why is 3 years, in particular, something to mention? Well, that’s one complete lectionary cycle. Like today, that day – August 7, 2016, was the 19th Sunday of Ordinary Time in Year C. The scripture readings were the same as today. So, for my own little celebration of thanksgiving for getting the chance to know all of you, I’d like to share with you this morning a revised version of that day’s sermon, “Enough Rope.” In today’s gospel lesson, Jesus invites us to focus every aspect of our lives on God, all the time. He knows how hard that can be – the barriers we face as we try to do that – and he works out each barrier for us. These barriers are worry, fear, and reluctance to accept our freedom in Christ. I’ll talk about each of these with you this morning and see what the parable has to say about letting go of reluctance – getting past the barriers – and living into the kingdom of God.

Please pray with me… Eternal and loving God, I pray that the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts will be acceptable to you, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

As we are about to go away on vacation with our whole family, I keep thinking this week about how rewarding it is to be a parent. I’m sure I might have mentioned to you once or twice by now, Linda and I have two girls. Emily and Julia are young adults now – but we have so many wonderful memories from their childhood. Taking them to the playground was one of my favorite things to do. I’d push their swings, lift them up to the top of the slide, play tag on the monkey bars… Our girls inspired me when they were little because they always lived life to the fullest. You know how kids are, they don’t fret about paying bills, cooking dinner,… and they couldn’t care less about that meeting you have scheduled for 8:30 tomorrow morning. Their whole life was focused, for that moment, on the playground. – And, they wanted nothing more than for me to watch everything they did. Julia would sit at the top of the slide calling out to me, “Watch Daddy, Daddy Watch. Watch me, Daddy!” – And I’d say, “I’m watching, Sweetie. I haven’t looked away once.” … Then she’d slide to the bottom, laughing as she went, and I’d say, “You’re such a good slider!” every time…. I wonder how many times in my life I’ve said, “Wow, you were swinging so high!” or “I wish I could jump as high as you.” Or – one of my favorites – “That was so nice of you to share the swings.” But, of course, it’s not just kids – aren’t we ALL kind of like that?… We all want our loved ones to see us at our best. In high school and college, I studied theatre so I was in a lot of plays. And, even in college, I’d always know when my parents were in the audience,… where they were sitting  – and I’d play to them just a little bit more than the rest of the audience…. As a high school wrestler, when I felt so alone on the mat – everyone in the stands was yelling out what I should do next: “sit out” “stand up” “use a cross-body ride.” Somehow, through all of that noise, I could pick out the voices of my brother and my dad. It made me stronger because I felt their presence with me, and I wanted them to see me do well. “Watch Daddy, Daddy watch!” After my grandparents passed away, sometimes I’d wonder – “if they are looking at me right now – at this moment – what are they thinking? Are they proud?” Even now, when I preach, when Linda and our kids are in the church I feel a little more focused – a little more confident. And, they are always quick to say, “Good job!” It’s my good pleasure as a father to say, “I’m so proud of you,” – because I know from experience how much it means to hear your parent say that – it’s a reward like none other – for them and for me. I think this is what Jesus is getting at in our gospel lesson today when he tells us the master comes to the door and knocks, seeing what his servants are doing, and that “it is the Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” – God wants to watch us on the playground and tell us, “Good Job;” … and to be the loved one we play to more than the rest of the audience. – God wants nothing more than to invite us to the kingdom, just as we want nothing more than to reward our own loved ones. But what does it really mean, that the Father “gives us the kingdom?” Is Jesus just talking about our reward in heaven after we die? NO he’s not… – the context of the entire passage has to do with how we live our lives NOW,… HERE,… TODAY. It seems like we always
think of God’s kingdom as heaven – but now Jesus is bringing it to earth through his ministry. That’s why, in just
the previous chapter, Jesus taught us to pray, saying, “Father, hallowed be your name. Your 
kingdom come,…”
+++ The kingdom comes to earth in Christ. So, through Christ – we can participate in the kingdom of God…

Now... Here... by turning over our hearts, our minds, and our actions – TO Christ. That’s what the Parable of
the Watchful Slaves is about – always being alert for the master – always dressed for action – always with your
lamps lit… Always being a little bit better because our savior is in the audience.

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BUT, it’s not always easy to live up to Christ’s example, is it? We have so many things to worry about – so many
tings to fear. It’s hard to be like children on the playground – focused only on the moment, being the best we can
be – RIGHT NOW. As adults, we have responsibilities – Right?? How are we supposed to balance our worldly
concerns and obligations with the call to follow Christ? The modern world is just too complex to turn everything
over to God, …isn’t it?… +++ +++ Well - earlier in this same chapter just before today’s text, Christ has already
solved that problem for us. We talked about it last week:: “the Parable of the Rich Fool,” when Jesus taught us the
value of storing up our treasures in the Lord instead of worldly possessions. In the verses following that, Jesus
said, “I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is
more than food, and the body more than clothing.” He asks us to “consider the lilies, how they grow;… they
neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so
clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he
clothe you?” +++ So, by the time we get to today’s lesson, we’ve been freed of every reason – every distraction –
every excuse – for turning our attention away from Christ.

And then Jesus opens today’s passage:: “Do not be afraid.”…. He understands that fear can paralyze us. It can get
in our way of trusting God to provide for us. … When we are afraid, we don’t think clearly, we tend to panic, and
make selfish choices. To follow Christ is to overcome fear… So his words, “Do Not Be Afraid”… they are not just
a comforting comment, patting us on the back to reassure us that everything is OK. NO, it is a command – In fact,
the original text was written in the Greek imperative voice, so it has the same kind of authority as phrases like:
“Don’t touch that!” or “Do not sit in my chair!” – “DO NOT BE AFRAID!” +++ And, there is no reason to fear
anymore, anyway – “for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” The kingdom of God is ours
already! +++ This is not a conditional statement. +++ The kingdom is not being held over us like a carrot, trying
to induce us to good behavior with the potential reward of the kingdom. No – Christ simply tells us that God gives
us the kingdom – and is PLEASED to do so! … It’s not something we earn. It’s something we’ve been given…

So now,… we don’t have to fear rejection or failure:: we’ve already received our reward:: – our place in the
kingdom of God. +++ Letting go of worries and with no fear, we are free to take everything we treasure…. – our
time,… our talent,… our possessions,… – and dedicate it all to the kingdom, +++ “for where your treasure is, there
your heart will be also”…. Christ FREES us to be bold… we are FREE to assert ourselves, FREE to be creative
in finding our own calling to follow him. We can put everything else aside and focus our lives on God.

So, in just a few words, Christ has taught us how to move past our worries and our fear, leaving us FREE. But,
unfortunately – FREEDOM itself is another word that scares us and makes us hesitate to act boldly, isn’t it? +++
Whenever we talk about freedom, it seems like there’s always a threat of judgment. If we make the wrong choice
then we have to pay the consequences. There’s always an implied danger with freedom:: the chance that a
parent,… the principal,… your boss,… a police officer,… or God is watching – ready to jump when we make a
mistake…. In fact, when we read today’s passage, it’s tempting to think that’s what it’s about. It tells us to stay
awake and be alert when the master returns home – ((and you never know when he’s going to show up))…. Is this
story a warning about what happens if we fall asleep? No –Jesus is telling a story about what happens when we
stay awake – when we are left on our own… when the master goes away… and we stay true to our calling…. True
freedom to live in Christ is not based on a threat of punishment – but on the promise of blessing…. “Blessed are
those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes,” It’s all positive – it’s the Father’s “good pleasure to
give you the kingdom.” +++ +++
It’s all pretty clear to Christ, but it seems like we always clump freedom and judgment together as some kind of “package deal”: You can’t have one without the other. +++ I’ve always thought that’s the great irony of the popular saying, “give them enough rope to hang themselves.” … I’m sure you’ve heard that phrase. Maybe you’ve used it… at work – or even in the church. It seems like we can’t empower someone to succeed without building in accountability if they fail…. “OK – I’ll go out a limb and trust you – but it’s on you if things don’t work out.” … “I’ll give you enough rope to hang yourself.” +++ It’s ironic, isn’t it? Freedom is usually only given if it can be handcuffed by the threat of accountability. +++ Is that even real freedom?+++ These questions are the theme of the song “Give a Man Enough Rope” from the Broadway musical, “The Will Rogers Follies.” The show tells the story of the famous humorist and expert rope/lasso Wild West Show performer of the early 20th century. One of eight children growing up in an Oklahoma Indian Territory, Will Rogers wonders how someone like him ever got to be famous. – The only thing he can figure is that the Lord gave him enough rope – and since ropes are what he does best – he just never looked back. He used his little bit of opportunity and made the most of it. +++ +++ Here’s part of the song: “Give a man enough rope, and he can hang himself or not, that is the choice that he has got. He could wind up hanging down from a tree or he could spin himself a life. That's what happened to me… Give a man enough rope, and he can get all tangled in the figure eights he tries to spin. But I've had luck, and my rope made me free, I've spun my fancy figures, wrote my columns, made my speeches, loved my horses, loved my fam'ly..., spun a lovely life, that's what happened to me.” +++ +++ Will teaches the audience that the only way to follow life’s call is to pursue our freedoms without fear, even at the risk of failure and rejection. 

The Good News is we have all been given enough rope – enough freedom, – to make our mark on the kingdom. We’ve been given rope with no strings attached – because Christ has given us freedom from worry and fear. We are not called to be robots doing just what we’ve been programmed to do – but to live fully and freely in the grace of Jesus Christ. Our reading from Isaiah gives us a blueprint for that life when God tells us to “do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.” +++ We never know which kind word we say, ++ which hot meal we serve, ++ which child we protect, ++ which neighbor we visit - will unlock our hearts and allow us to see the Holy Spirit at work – through us.+++ When it does happen, the master has returned – and found us awake,… alert,… dressed,… and ready to serve. +++ +++ This morning, I hope that YOU may be like a child on the playground, without worry or fear – focused only on the gift of each moment,… always being the best you can be – RIGHT NOW – with faith that God is watching – and wanting Christ to see you at your best. May you often wonder – “Is Jesus looking at me right now? If so, what does he think?” … If you do, then like a parent on the playground, Christ’s answer will be, “I’m watching Sweetie. I haven’t looked away once…. and I’m so proud of you.”

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.