

“Be Careful of What You Treasure”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, August 7, 2017
Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Readings from Scripture: Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16 and Luke 12:32-40

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old--and Sarah herself was barren--because he considered God faithful who had promised. Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, “as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.”

All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, God has prepared a city for them.

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

“Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

“Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves.

But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

Luke 12:32-40

Let us pray: Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations and our faith to the power of your holy word. We pray that the words we hear, the words we offer in song and in prayer, the words that have been read from scripture and those that you have laid upon my heart this morning all become that word, the life-giving word of Jesus Christ. I pray that that word would go forth and do its work within us, among us and through us, out into a hurting and broken world. May we be a people of grace, of mercy, of love and of care. And all of this we ask in Christ’s name. Amen.

Tomorrow at mid-day I will get on a plane and fly to Baltimore to begin a week at a conference on contemplative leadership for clergy. This is the concluding week of a year-long invitation to learn how to lead and be a pastor from a place of stillness and quiet, a place of deep peacefulness and the reassurance of God's richest blessings for all people, a time to get underneath the worry and the fear and the demands of life. So for a year I have been invited to read some spiritual classics, to pray for colleagues around the country but mostly to spend 20 minutes each day doing absolutely nothing. I've been invited to sit in stillness, eyes closed, breathing deeply and try not to do anything. For many, the discipline of contemplative prayer makes no sense. Sitting in stillness for 20 minutes a day means that they have wasted that amount of time, that they have ignored the important demands of things that need to get done. But what I'd like to share are a few things that I have learned--and I have a long way to go--but a few things that I have learned along this journey, because as I have considered this day's Gospel lesson while also having the list of things I need to get ready for my trip tomorrow, I realize that there is a corollary between the lessons of stillness and the Gospel invitation from Luke.

The first thing that Luke says in this passage is similar to every message that we hear from an angel in the new testament: Do not be afraid. I do not know the number of times that I have preached and prayed, but mostly preached, about this passage--this idea of *do not be afraid*, but here it is again. Do not be afraid little flock for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Time and again in the life of Christians, in the life of each of us as individuals and in the life of our congregation, when we become afraid about something, it's like ice forms around our feet and fire fills our gut and we can't move and we're uneasy and we're unsure and we don't have that sense of what God would like for us to do. I've come to realize that doubt is not the opposite of faith. Fear is the opposite of faith. That's why again, and again, and again in the New Testament we hear do not be afraid. Do not be afraid. In fact the Hebrews passage that Karen read in a sense is a list of what happens when Abraham is not afraid. By faith he obeyed what God told him to do. By faith he stayed for a time in the land and then took his people with him. By faith he received the power of procreation. By faith through one person that everybody thought he and his wife were barren and done having children, an entire blessed nation is formed. Abraham was not afraid. He heard God speak and he responded. He had faith. And so faith and fear are in tension among us. When we get quiet, when we get below the struggle, we can hear that word of faith emerge in the midst of all of our fear.

Now some of you may have seen this amazingly handsome gentleman inserted into your bulletin. I believe he's in the house somewhere...oh, there he is. Okay. Everyone's pointing to him and he's hiding. This is one example of are we afraid or do we have faith? Are we afraid to bring to the attention of the congregation that we need to raise \$51,000 for maintenance items? Because we should have put that in the budget. We should have already thought about that in the capital campaign. We should have, we should have, we should have....Or, do you have faith that maybe if we put it in, there will be a response and maybe, as is always the case, the response will be gracious. In this story it says that the need is \$51,258 and that Mr. Gift realized he could give 1/100 of that and he invited you all to join him and was hoping that 99 other people would do so. I didn't do the math but what I can tell you is that we now need to raise about \$12,000 to pay off what we owe. So from 51 to 12, this for us is an act of faith and of not being afraid, of just doing what we can.

The next thing that Luke invites us to realize is that we need to sell our possessions and give alms. If we take that literally, then that's an invitation to give your shoes to turn them into well water. That's a literal translation of that. If you have something and you can make the life of someone else better, do it for them. But what I've realized is that a lot of times when we hear "sell your possessions and give alms" we think it means sell everything you have and give to the poor. That's not what we can do. That's where we get stuck in fear. We start to worry--should I do it all, should I do more, should I do this, should I do that--and we end up frozen again, not doing anything. Luke, and I believe Christ, invites us always to simply do what we can. Do what you can to make the lives of someone else better. If you can bring shoes or buy a pair of shoes, do that. If you can knit something for a child in Africa, do that. If you can make a \$10 donation to help pay for

maintenance, do that. Do what you can to make the life of someone else better. Because when we serve others, we find out that we, in fact, are blessed.

Here's an email that a friend of mine received after doing a retreat for survivors of a tornado that happened about a year ago. This is a person who attended the retreat responding: "I have been trying to email you all week, but can't seem to come up with the words to describe how much I appreciate you allowing me to come to this retreat. It helped me more than I ever realized it would. Disasters change you forever in many different ways regardless of what part you have in it. To be able to listen to everyone else and what they experienced, how they struggle with the same issues, ask God the same questions, and how exhausted they, as well, helped greatly. For over a year I felt like I had been holding my breath and running as fast as I can. Your group was like an oxygen mask a doctor would put on to help you breathe--in my case a ventilator. After Saturday, the day of the retreat, I started to breathe again slowly but breathing on my own all because of the love you have for God and allowing God to love me through what you did. Thank you so very much for the lifeline. I'm hopeful now that there is a tomorrow and that it will be a good one." That's the end of the email. Someone gave a day of their life, offered a retreat for people that had survived disaster, and this is the message of blessing in response that they got. Again, do not be afraid, take what you have and serve others.

The famous passage from Luke is the one about where your treasure is there your heart will be also. What you think about, what you worry about, what you fret about, what you dream about and what you dwell on--these are the things that fill your heart and guide your life and your actions. One of the things that I have been invited to do over this year, and I would invite each of you to do when you feel yourself more trapped by faith than feeling free and spacious in a sense of faithfulness, is to come to scripture and to read it slowly and to hear it addressed to you--hear it addressed to you, not to some church or some community 1000 years ago, but hear it addressed to you. Do not be afraid, you who are worried, who are struggling, who are wondering, you who have doubts, you who think you aren't quite doing enough. Do not be afraid for it is your Father's good pleasure to give **you** the kingdom. To give you all the blessings of heaven. To give you the assurance of your forgiveness. To give you the affirmation that you are loved no matter who you are or what you have done. To convince you that you belong in the community of the beloved and that your place is always secure. This is what happens when we read just one line of scripture and we allow it to speak to us at that deeper place. We don't read it literally, we read it spiritually.

And finally Luke says that we need to be ready. We need to have the lamps lit and be attentive because we're never quite sure when God is going to show up. We often think that this is some huge revelation or epiphany about God showing up, but sometimes it's small blessings. Sometimes it's things that remind us what matters most in ministry and in life. I've shared before about an email that I've received but I am going to share it again because of the beauty of the message and a reminder of what it means for all of us to be underneath fear. On May 3rd of this year as I was recovering from surgery, a friend that I had met in this program in Baltimore sent me an email. I had told him that I was doing okay, but I was kind of wondering about all of these different things. I was needing to learn how to be patient, how to ask for help, how to make peace with the fact that I was now limited in my mobility, couldn't do the things I wanted to do and was often just flat-out frustrated. He emailed me and said, "This is what I heard this morning." And now that phrase is taped on my computer screen at home. It says quite simply, "Stop, notice your feet, settle, then go on." I'm not sure that the man understood how important it was for me to hear those words at that time. Because what he's not aware of, but I will make him aware of this week, is the fact that the second line "notice your feet" is the reason that I had surgery. I had lost all feeling in my feet. He doesn't know that. He just sent a simple message to remind me to slow down, to pay attention and then to move forward gently. But in that message there was an incredible blessing to me and a blessing for all of us when we realize that we can have moments of stillness where we get below the fear, where we are able to breathe, where we are able to listen and to be reminded that in the end, everything will be okay, and then from there we move forward. We act graciously and gently, we forgive those who hurt us, we love the unloveable, we care for

those who are suffering, we welcome the stranger, we feed the hungry, we care for those in need--all of these things bubble up from that deep awareness that each of us carry within, if we look deep enough, that God's love is for us and for everyone. May it be so. Amen.