

Sermon Trinity-St. Paul

Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost – 07 August 2016

The vision of Isaiah son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah! What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation— I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. Come now, let us argue it out, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken. ***NRSV Isaiah 1:1,10-20***

“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.” ***NRSV Luke 12:32-40***

“Being Rich, Being Ready”

You know how much I love to find a funny church sign. Well, I found a new one this week. The front lawn of Middletown Baptist Church was almost waist-deep in snow, and you could hardly even see the sign which read, *“Whoever is praying for snow, please know that we’re very impressed. Now, how about praying for world peace?”* 😊....why not, if you’re on a roll!

We sure could use some good news, couldn’t we? One of the Presidential Candidates for the United States sinks lower and lower...we stand by and listen in shock, as he belittles the parents of a soldier who died protecting fellow Americans. And whatever we wish to think, the truth is that the sentiments to the south of our bordertend to cross that border and they can influence our sensibilities. Closer to home, we hear that there are over 31,000 less jobs in Canada as of July, with unemployment rising to almost 7%. And the videos of violence keep rolling in. Black people ask us to hear the truth of their issues, and white people respond in a blind panic, calling reverse racism, vilifying the victims, blindly holding to the belief that life is equally fair to everyone - unable to accept that people of other races *so often* have a very different experience than white people do. The battles rage on - some random person on the street says they want to kill cops, and we erroneously blame that crazy ideology on the leaders of the Black Lives Matter movement. It feels like logic has left town. We’re inundated with tragedy and loss, and we can easily give in to fear, and to the division and the strife that fear brings.

Honestly, a fast reading of the gospel lessons these days might even add to our tension. Last week we talked about how we should be conducting our lives - we're supposed to make sure that we don't store up our treasures here on earth because we're supposed to be "*rich toward God*". But we discovered the great irony in that passage - being rich toward God is not being overtly pious, keeping our heads in the clouds and copping out of life on earth - rather, it's the opposite - being rich toward God, is about being rich and generous and loving to the people right here where we live. Being rich toward God calls us to get our heads *out* of the clouds and to look around and to respond to *this* world which is so desperate for healing. And this week we get a similar call - here it is again - today's gospel tells us *don't be afraid, but do be ready*. Wow - we're supposed to be dressed for action with our lamps lit, so that when the Lord comes and finds us prepared, the Lord will in turn, serve us. There's a lot of pressure in these readings....it feels like there's a lot demanded of us if we want to make it as authentic Christ-followers.

So what do we do? How are we supposed to live our lives, being *rich toward God* and being *ready*? To paraphrase from Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, *because we're all so virtuous, are there to be no more cakes and ale?** Are we to stop enjoying the beautiful things in life? Is there to be no more leisure and fun? Are Christians supposed to be negative and serious all the time - racing around to help others and constantly checking our behavior?

Well it might help us to take a look at the Old Testament reading to get some perspective. Here we have a look at the liturgy and customs of God's people, with the prophet Isaiah absolutely trashing their priorities. He tells the people how *fed up* God is with what seems important to the people. He speaks in God's voice, saying, *What do I care about your many sacrifices? I've had quite enough of your burnt offerings - and who asked you to do that anyway? I don't care about your incense or your new moon festivals - I cannot endure your assemblies. They've become a burden to me, and I've grown weary of them!* But the prophet doesn't leave us hanging there - he continues with what God *does* want from us. And it's quite simple - he says, "*...learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow ...If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land.*"

What can we learn from this? I think it's always a good idea to take an inventory of what's important to us as a community. Where do we get hung up? Where do we invest most of our energy? What makes us argue the most? What causes the deepest tensions among us? It would not be helpful to interpret this passage as God hating liturgy. Sometimes it's hard for us, though, to remember that we humans *made up* all the doctrine and theology and liturgy. That doesn't mean that it's wrong...sometimes we created these things in a self-serving way, sometimes in a thoughtful and prayerful and faithful way, and they're very important to the life of the church. The part that God made up, however, is too easy for us to forget. And that's the part about seeking justice, defending the orphan and the widow, and rescuing the oppressed. Apparently, *that's* the currency God asks of us. That's what we're *supposed* to be all about. Again, church buildings and ceremonies and liturgy and worship space and religious customs are not *bad* - but we can turn them into idols and worship them, and fight like cats and dogs to defend our positions. Dr. Erick Thompson suggests that what Luke is asking us to do here, when he challenges us to be ready, is this. He wants us to prayerfully prioritize. To focus on the things

that have value on an eternal plane. To remember who we are as Christ-followers - that we we're here not to build our own religion to please ourselves, but rather, to share God's love and healing.

You know, we're poised right now for a potential dust-up, with all the changes and the renovations coming up. We've all had enough church experience to know how difficult and divisive this can be. **But it doesn't have to be.** I refer often to that round table in my office as a theological statement. In this place, we do things *together*. Every opinion matters, and will be heard with respect. Differences *can* be worked out around that table, especially when our choices reflect how best to serve our gospel calling, rather than how best to serve our personal preferences. These big-ticket items always call for some compromise, but we can honour the tradition and integrity of our surroundings and at the same time prepare for our future shared ministry. *However* the renovations turn out, *however* the liturgy and music evolve, what's important is how we reach out to the hearts and lives of the people around us, as individuals, and as a parish.

There was a popular bumper sticker that said, "Jesus is coming - look busy!" ☺ There's the pressure again - there's that tone of dread and judgement - who will be found ready? Who won't make it? Will *I* make it? But Dr. Karoline Lewis reminds us of the good news in today's story --- she reminds us that it all boils down to the promise in this gospel where Luke says yes, we should try to be ready...because *the Lord wants to come and serve us all*. So how do we hear this challenge to be rich toward God, and to be ready? As a threat or as a promise? **Can we work on our building and ministries with a passionate gospel vision for healing the world?** Can we laugh together in love while we do it? **I believe we can.** And I believe the greatest reward and personal joy will come as a result. If we remember that God part - you know, that part about seeking justice and rescuing the oppressed, as our whole reason for existing - if we can work together and plan together to prepare this building with that God part as the priority - I believe it will be more than virtuous. More than obedient. I think it will be *fun*. It will help us to discover who we are - who we're supposed to be as Christ-followers. And that's the great discovery we're looking for. That's the real point in showing up Sunday after Sunday. That's where we'll find strength and identity and purpose. There's a lot of fear in the church all over the world, because of the universal decline - because things have changed since the days when crowds of people flocked to church. And people are worrying and fretting about it to the point of frenzy. But I wonder if it's time to let go of our old visions of how things should be. Do we dare to re-imagine what church life could be? Can we rejoice in the people that *are* here, and get closer to one another, working together on an emerging sense of mission? Can we let go of old issues and differences, and find a new way forward? Can we celebrate the talents and gifts that we *do* have - and give them to God asking for direction? I think we can, and I think we will. Being rich toward God and being ready are not an ominous obligation - they're an invitation to joy and fulfilment. My friends, there is hope, there is beauty and there is love - all for us to share together here in community. We should know this better than anyone, as we're transformed by divine love. I was deeply moved by Paul Simon's words from one of his new songs, "*Proof of Love*". He says,

*I ask the Lord for proof of love.
love is all I seek.*

*Love is all I seek,
And when at times my words desert me, music*

is the tongue I speak.

Silent night, still as prayer

Darkness fills with light

Love on earth, is everywhere.

Being rich toward God is about celebrating and living passionately into all that is beautifully human. And being ready is the same. Yes, God calls us to be faithful. But he also calls us deeply into the joys of being alive...the joys of laughing together, playing together, caring together and growing together. You are God's holy, beloved child. Being holy is not about being moral, being good or getting your theology right - being holy is about engaging in that love on earth that is everywhere. *Are we to be so virtuous, then, that there will be no more cakes and ale?* I think not. I say bring on the cakes and ale and let us be fully human. Let us walk together toward whatever God is asking of this renewed and reconfigured group of amazing saints, trusting in that holy love that we can find all around us, even right here, if we look for it.

Amen!

*paraphrase from *Twelfth Night, Act 2, Scene 3*.