

August 11, 2013

The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 12:32–40

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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So, we are well into the section of Luke's gospel known as the travel narrative where Jesus sets his eyes towards Jerusalem. It will take 10 chapters for Jesus to arrive and when he does, it will be for his triumphal entry, trial and death. This gospel passage is about three chapters into the travel narrative, so since Jesus is intent upon Jerusalem, it is not surprising that some of his teaching is to prepare his disciples for when he is no longer with them.

Immediately preceding today's gospel is Jesus talking about how the lilies of the field grow because of God's care and noting that God provides for even the ravens. So this "Do not fear" opening to today's gospel, is not some out-of-the-blue optimistic statement, but a continuation of his previous teaching about how attentive God is to needs of all the creatures in creation. And the same is true for us.

As we continue through today's gospel, Jesus goes on to talk about treasure and about being prepared. With these three themes: fear, treasure, and be prepared - theologian Karoline Lewis posits we have an outline for what is required of us in living a life of faith.

Let's start with fear. Jesus says, do not fear. Look at the ravens and lilies, common sights the disciples might have seen when they sat down in despair or befuddlement wondering what to do. They might look out and see beautiful flowers in a field or a bird soaring through the sky and remember Jesus' words...do not fear. This is a reminder for us to do a spiritual gut-check. Am I being driven by fear and anxiety, and if so why, what is the root of that fear. If you are wired like me, you are really good at responding to what is going on around you, responding to the work that you need to do; and while we are busy doing, we are not so aware of what is driving us. Noting the raven, stopping to take a minute to check and see what within us is driving our response, be it anxiety, fear, expediency or clarity, love, or faith – taking that minute to stop and come aware helps us to begin to note what is life-giving for us, what calls out the gifts God has bestowed upon us and what is weighing us down.

You are probably not surprised to hear this, but my five year old has my number. She knows how to get under my skin and draw out a response from me, like no one else can. I have recently begun to integrate this spiritual practice into my parenting - instead of immediately responding and losing my cool, I force myself to stop and take a deep breath - sometimes even placing a hand to my stomach to draw my focus even more intently into this physical act, feeling the intake and exhale of air. And after I take this breath, I make note of my own anxiety - we have to be out the door right now - and no you can't show me one more thing or grab one more toy or change your shoes for the fourth time. Forcing myself to pause in this way - and it really is only a second- interrupts my knee-jerk response shifting me to recognize that relationship with my

daughter is more important than raging over getting out the door on-time. I still move us along, there are places we need to be, but this pause gives me space to find a way for us to move on with our day without having to carry my anxiety, irritation, and fear with us.

Do not be driven by fear and anxiety. God calls us to move through the world with the assurance of God's love for us, move through the world in a way that leads to life, abundant life for you and for those near and dear to you. God cares for you and your needs just as God cares for all of creation.

Let's move on to treasure. Tim spoke a lot about this last week. We struggle with our desire for things and not allowing our desire or our things take claim over us. Each and every time we gather for worship, we re-orient ourselves to God. We are reminded through our worship what is important, what it is we value, what we hold to be true in our lives. We desire God's love for us and to be in relationship with God. We treasure and honor that love through our lives, what we do and who we are.

Of course there are distractions, shiny pretty distractions, and of course there are going to be times that we lose our way. But time and again God calls us back or we call one another back - we remind each other to come to church, that we are missed as a beloved member of this community. And when we sit in the quiet of our room and begin to say prayers or when we come to worship, we find our hearts easily to God, the source of our life and love.

The third theme Jesus talked about was about being prepared: "be dressed for action," he says, "and have your lamps lit." Be alert - be ready to see God's activity in the world - when and where you least expect it. See the kingdom of God here and now and participate in it here and now. Participating in the kingdom now means responding to God's love for you, instead of sitting around passively waiting for instructions. So be dressed for action with your whole being - your mind, your heart - and participate in God's kingdom.

Today we celebrate Thread's 9th birthday. This is a much beloved and desperately needed ministry in our community. I want to go back 10 or 11 years ago, before the shop had opened, before a single item of clothing was hung on the racks. Threads is a ministry that came out of a period of intentional discernment by this parish. We knew that it was time for a new outreach ministry, and we wanted to make sure that what we did would have an impact on the city of Atlanta. So, after much research, we discovered that there was a great need for clothes for children who were living in extreme poverty in our city. And the idea was formed for a clothing ministry, a children's boutique where kids and their families could come and shop, select their clothes and leave with a shopping bag full of enough clothes to get them through a week of school.

While I wasn't here at the time, I would imagine that initially there was some fear in this community: how will we fund this? Where will the shop be? What if we need that space for other groups or programs? Who will staff it? How will we fill it with clothing? What if no one comes? You, All Saints', didn't allow these fears to deter you from forging ahead. There was a stronger drive at work here - faith that this was where God was calling us, and a loving desire to respond to the needs of Atlanta.

This stronger drive came out of a clear awareness of treasure. We at All Saints' treasure children in our community. We recognize need all around us in the faces of the people of our city. And the faces that frequently go unseen, and the voices unheard are the ones of children who are being raised in extreme poverty. You as a community decided to put your time, your resources, your love into this treasure, the children of Atlanta, an overlooked group of God's beloved family.

And so Threads was launched, housed over in Tate Hall. Each week volunteers at Threads prepare to welcome families, prepare to see, experience and participate in God's kingdom. We scout the local Target and Payless stores for clearance deals on socks, underwear, jeans, uniforms and shoes. And we wash every item of gently used clothes that this faithful community donates, and we sew on missing buttons and we iron wrinkled clothes, and we restock the shop. On shopping days families are matched with a volunteer personal shopper who guides them through the process and makes sure that they have everything they need for their children. And when the doors close on the last family served that day, the volunteers get busy preparing the shop for the next round of families on the next shopping day. We do all this to welcome God's beloved children and clothe them with beautiful clothing and new shoes so that they and their families feel and believe that they have dignity, are valued, are beloved.

As of Thursday, Threads had served 105 children in the past week, and I learned via Facebook last night that they served 72 children in the 3 hours the shop was open yesterday. That is 885 pairs of underwear and socks that have been distributed this week. It is amazing the scope of this ministry and the practicalities required for being prepared. There are many people in and out of that shop, and each week God's kingdom is experienced there in that tiny space. We are blessed with faithful parishioners who are prepared to see God's grace at work, prepared to see and participate in God's kingdom.

I want to share with you a story. This week there was a woman who was referred to us from one of the shelters. She came and shopped for her children and when she was done, one volunteer noticed she had only taken two items for each child. He said, "why did you only take two, you can shop for up to seven items per child." She replied, "there is probably someone else out there that needs things more than me."

Be dressed for action. Have your lamps lit. Be prepared and see God's kingdom at work, see lives transformed.

The story of Threads, my friends, is what it is to walk by faith in a broken world. God's kingdom is present here even amidst our brokenness.

You are not going to have your fear in check, know where your treasure is and be prepared all at one time and for the rest of your life. We all struggle with each of these. We struggle with them at times on a daily basis. When you are struggling, look out your window at the birds, look at the flowers, give yourself a spiritual gut-check and find what is out of alignment and begin to work towards centering yourself back on God, on living a life of faith and trusting in God's love for you. Continue to pray, and breathe, share communion, and pause and recognize Christ in one another. Do what you need to do to be dressed for action, to see the grace of God, the promise of God in the world around you. Light those lamps.