

The 8th Sunday after Pentecost
August 4, 2019
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Hosea 11:1-11
Psalm 107:1-9, 43
Colossians 3:1-11
Luke 12:13-21

Have you ever walked into the middle of a conversation and not understand what was being said? Or had to leave early, and wonder what the final outcome would be?

Of course you have. We all have. And so we all know how easy it for us to miss the point that way. How we might draw the wrong conclusions. How important it is to hear the whole of a story, if we're to make sense of it.

That's a problem for us every Sunday morning; we're always walking into the middle of conversations.

And that's a particular problem for us when we hear this morning's reading from Colossians. To tell you the truth, I did not want to preach on it at all, but we walk right in the middle of a conversation today. And I worry we'll miss the point, that we won't know how to make sense of it, or worse, that we'll draw some wrong conclusions.

By the way, the very first word shouldn't be "if"; it should be "since." The writer – probably NOT Paul, for what it's worth – isn't telling us we have to "prove" ourselves. It's all baptismal language: you *have* been buried with Christ; you *have* been raised with Christ. The point is to say that since our lives are *already* caught up in the new and resurrected life of Christ, we have a chance to live that way.

But we don't really hear about the new life, the resurrected life. We only hear part of the conversation here this morning, the part about the old life we've left behind: an admonition to "set [our] minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth"; a laundry list of "don'ts" – fornication, impurity, passion, and the like; a disdain for the lies and vulgar words we speak.

And if that's all there were to say, maybe all we'd think is that we're supposed to conclude that we were born into a crappy world and we should – *if* we want to be worth anything in God's sight – make sure we don't get dirty, that we should somehow not get dragged down into the sordidness of human existence in this world.

Now we know there's a lot wrong with this world. We don't need the author of Colossians to tell us that. We hear the news. Three mass shootings this past week alone: one in California, three dead, 20 killed yesterday at a Walmart in El Paso, and nine more overnight in Dayton, Ohio. But that's not the whole of it. Not now. And it wasn't the whole of it then either.

But we don't hear the rest of the conversation here this morning. If we were to keep listening, we might hear more than a negation of our earthly and material existence. We might hear good news: that there is another way for us to live in this fleshy world we share with one another.

In the very next verses, just past where we left off this morning:

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

Colossians 3:12-14

This earth is the only reality we know. This is where we live out the days of our lives. We can settle for living concerned only for ourselves, treating everyone we meet as a means to our own end. Or we can strive to live together in community ... above all, clothing ourselves with love.

As I said, I didn't really want to preach on Colossians at all this morning. But I worried we'd only hear the bad news that this world is dirty, rather the good news of how good life can be.

As it turns out, we're walking rather into the middle of a conversation in this morning's gospel, as well. Jesus has been telling anyone who would listen that life is good, the world is beautiful, and the love of God is sure. He talks about sparrows, five for two pennies ... and none of them forgotten by our Creator. He talks about the hairs of our head, all of them counted by our Maker. He insists that we are, each of us, infinitely more precious to God.

And *since* this *is* his gospel truth, even as Jesus acknowledges that life can be hard and allows that we will not be kept safe from violence, he tells us to hold fast even when it feels unsafe. For all that challenges us in this life, the goodness of creation and God's love for us will sustain us.

And then "someone in the crowd" interrupts Jesus. That's where we begin this morning. Right in the middle of a conversation about how there is enough for us all, a brother just wants Jesus to make sure he gets his fair share. Jesus declines, of course. And he tells the brother there's no joy in trying to live that way, he tells him to be on guard against greed, the insatiable feeling that there's never going to be enough.

And to drive the point home, Jesus tells a story. A rich man is unreservedly and undeservedly blessed with a great harvest. That's how it begins.

And yet, by the time all is said and done in the story, God deems him a fool. Not because he's rich. After all, he was already rich before the abundant harvest came in. And not because he saves for the future against an uncertain future. Nothing is said against prudent saving here. Consider the old, old story about Joseph in the land Egypt, advising Pharaoh to build barns to store crops in advance of seven years of famine.

No, I think the man's foolishness is his imagining that he created his good fortune *ex nihilo*, that he did it all by himself and that he, therefore, is accountable to nobody else when he decides what to do next. Listen, again, to the conversation he has with himself, never bothering to consult with a spouse or a friend or a parent or a neighbor, only himself:

"What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?" Then he said, "I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'"

Of course, he didn't make the harvest grow. God gave the growth. The land produced the crop.

And it would have taken laborers to plant the seeds, to tend the fields. In a time long, long before tractors and combines, getting the crop in would have required workers. A lot of them. Slaves. Family. Tenants. Day workers. Peasants. It would have been by their sweat that the harvest is so miraculously productive.

And so God enters into the story and calls the man a fool.

Jesus says we have a choice. I think it's the very same choice outlined in our reading from Colossians, a choice between two ways of living in this world: to settle for living only for ourselves or, that we might live together in community, to "clothe ourselves in love."

Jesus says it's foolishness to imagine we're only here to take care of ourselves. Instead, he hopes we will aspire to be "rich toward God."

And then, here this morning, we leave the conversation. And that's a problem, I think, because we leave too soon and never hear Jesus say what he means by the phrase "rich toward God."

As it happens, in the very next verses, Jesus returns to what he'd been talking about before we walked into the middle of it all this morning. He had been talking about sparrows and the sureness of God's love.

Jesus returns to the same themes next, talking about ravens, who have no storehouse or barn ... and about the lilies of the field, who neither toil nor spin. And yet there is enough for them all in God's design for this world.

As Gandhi once observed, "Earth provides enough to satisfy everyone's need, but not everyone's greed."

I think this is what Jesus means when he talks about being "rich toward God." Notice how beauty and love fill the world. Learn that there's no joy in living only for ourselves, so strive for "kingdom of God" ... live into God's dream for how we might live together in this world.

Perhaps Frederick Buechner was thinking of this morning's gospel when he wrote this:

People are free in this world to live for themselves alone if they want and let the rest go hang, and they are free to live out the dismal consequences as long as they can stand it. The doctrine of Hell proclaims that they retain this same freedom in whatever world comes next. Thus the possibility of making damned fools of ourselves would appear limitless.ⁱ

And I suppose that's another way of framing the choices laid before us ... in both our reading from Colossians and from Luke. In Colossians, it's the "old life" versus the "new life." In our gospel this morning, it's the difference between "those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God." But maybe it's all the same.

Or maybe, as Frederick Buechner intimates, it's the choice between heaven or hell here on earth.

I'm reminded of a story, a parable in its own right. I've seen various versions of it, but the first time I remember it was in a novel called *The Bean Trees*, by Barbara Kingsolver.ⁱⁱ I'll end with it, as I think it lays before us the choices life always presents: the "old life" or the "new life," as it's described in Colossians; giving in to greed or being "rich toward God," as Jesus makes the distinction.

She says it's a South American Indian story about heaven and hell. If you go visit hell, you will discover a kitchen. A pot of delicious stew sits on the table, with the most delicate aroma you can imagine. All around, people sit. But they are dying of starvation. They are jibbering and jabbering, but they cannot get a bite of this wonderful stew God has made for them.

They have spoons, but the spoons are attached to their hands with very long handles, as long as a mop. With these ridiculous, terrible spoons, the people in hell can reach into the pot but they cannot put the food in their mouths. So they are hungry and starving and swearing and cursing each other!

The surprise is that if you visit heaven, you see a room just like the first one, the same table, the same pot of stew, the same spoons with handles as long as a sponge mop. But these people are all happy and magnificently well-fed. And the only difference between heaven and hell is this. The people in heaven use their spoons to feed one another.

ⁱ Frederick Buechner, "Hell," in *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (HarperCollins Publishers, NY, 1973), p. 37.

ⁱⁱ My version here is a fairly faithful, albeit slightly modified, retelling of her version of the story. After Sunday's sermon, as I was being greeted at the door, I was advised that the original story actually goes back to Dante's *Inferno*.