

KEEP THE HOME FIRE BURNING

A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Nadene Grieve-Deslippe August 8, 2010

Crossroads United Church

Isaiah 1:1,10-20

Luke 12:32-40

My mother is her mother's daughter. She was raised by a devout and staunch Methodist teetotaler and to this day has never had a sip of alcohol. From my mother's lips I was taught many of the lessons that she received from her mother's knee-among them the counsel to never be doing anything that might disappoint Jesus should he return and walk in on the act. I can't tell you how that notion terrified me as a child-especially when I was actively doing those things that I knew I should not be doing- like reaching into the cookie jar, or kicking my dirty laundry under the bed rather than putting it into the hamper when I had been told to clean up my room. I was afraid on days that I had pushed the envelope to even answer the door, lest a very disappointed Jesus be on the other side tsk tsking at the figurative crumbs on my mouth.

I had cousins, who shared my maternal grandmother as their paternal grandmother, and they had a different maternal grandmother. She was a dedicated monarchist and counseled her grandchildren to never be caught doing things that they would be ashamed of if the queen came for tea. I thought that they got off a little light. While I was reasonably sure that her highness would never come a knocking, I was not as convinced that Jesus wouldn't. I have learned that guilt can be a great motivator as we cover our footsteps and appeal for forgiveness. Whether monarchs of this realm or the high king of heaven are afoot, we are to conduct ourselves with as much faith, decorum and compassion as is possible every moment of every day. I can't tell you how much that cramped my existence in my formative years. And the common thread that runs through Hebraic prophecy and the gospel lesson for today is the reminder to be prepared and to reflect the light of God.

God desires more than the rote recitation of prayers and ritual. God wants us to be righteous, and proffering good to those in need and instrumental in bringing justice to fruition. God will forgive imperfection and infraction and will even reward those who make a sincere effort to live as sons and daughters. This is the essence of the Hebrew text, and it is aided and abetted in the gospel with the counsel of Jesus to give alms, and to be prepared for the return of the Lord. My grandmother must have known this scripture like the back of her hand. "You must be ready for the son of man is coming at an unexpected hour!"

I have long abandoned literalism as I have been maturing in the faith. And yet, I think that there is something poignant and engaging about this gospel text. Rendered down to its simplest it contains 6 urgings on how to live our lives in faith: don't be afraid; don't cling to possessions; give offerings; be dressed for action; light your lamps; and be ready. It can probably be made even more succinct as some of the particulars really suggest the same thing. Allay your fears; share and be prepared. As with many things, the simple things are not always the easiest to integrate. It is not easy for the person of deepest faith to completely abandon all fears; as it is not given to most of us to part with our subsistence or live in a state of ever preparedness. To do so would have us branded naïve, arrogant or paranoid.

This text was written to encourage steadfast faith in the time that had elapsed between the ascension, and the return of the Lord. The disciples of Jesus anticipated an immanent return, but as days turned to weeks, months and years following the resurrection and ascension, fellow disciples needed to be encouraged to live their lives faithfully, and obediently and in a state of preparedness, despite the delay. And whereas this teaching would have had a timely component for those who had to change their expectation from an immanent return to a return at some future point, this is the juncture at which we have always lived.

From the time that we were taken to church in our mother's arms we have been living our faith between memory and hope. Faithful living in our generation seems to be

rooted in holding two seeming opposite truths in tension. We are to live our lives as though we had a grand and long future, while conducting ourselves as though we might die today. We are to be agents and servants of the gospel: sharing with those in need; offering our gifts in service; and using our God given capacity for love and service to make a difference in the world. We are to be ready to respond to the return of the master from the wedding, and have our lives, homes and circumstances in a state of preparedness. Since we do not know the day or the time, this scripture encourages us to be ever ready. Keep the home fires burning.

Ralph Waldo Emerson has said, “To finish the moment, to find the journey’s end in every step of the road, to live the greatest number of good hours, is wisdom.” The wisdom of the sages and the ages verily shouts in unity to be mindful and loving and giving in every waking moment. This is not always easy in the rote routine of daily living. Who among us has found themselves behind the wheel of a car, maneuvering through traffic and seemingly aware of the road, only to come to some level of consciousness that grasps we are further down the pike than we thought? Somehow we have managed to get from point A to point B while seemingly unaware of the passage. So mindful living is no small or easy thing in the routine of daily living. And with knowledge there accompanies wisdom that makes living without fear equally as challenging for the person of faith.

When our daughter told me recently that she was pregnant I was elated that the eternal now of life and love would be played out in our family. At the same time, I was mindful of the fragility of human life. The human being and spirit are tenacious-make no mistake that I heartily embrace this and am more positive than pessimistic- but because I have celebrated the lives of babies born too soon and mourned those who succumbed after complications in delivery, I cannot be blind to the possibility. It does not consume me, nor does it supersede my joy. Like the metaphor of the thief in the gospel we need to be reality based, while at the same time, being hope filled. I recognize that there are things over which I have no control, but I also recognize that the treasure of my life has very little to do with possessions and bank accounts. Within the treasure of my family

lies my heart. It is within the treasure of my family that I have witnessed the face of God and had significant encounters with grace that have transformed my faith. I do not cling to them as my sole reason for being. I do hold my treasure in my heart and live mindfully, hopefully and lovingly-with open heart and eyes open.

If being reality based and hoped filled makes me less than faithful in the living of my life then I trust that God will understand, accept and forgive me my human frailty. I share this not in self- deprecation, nor for arguments sake, but in honesty and humility. The instruction of Jesus to his hearers through the pen of Luke can be rendered down to their simplest in form, but the challenge is in the integrating and living of the words. Do not be afraid. Do not cling to things but share what you have. Be ready for the expected and the unexpected.

Fear must never be our master. This is the essence of Jesus' counsel. If you are afraid to lose then you will never risk. You will not risk pushing the limits of your own needs and desires. If you are afraid you will hold tight to old ideas as well as old things that may have outlived their usefulness. If you live in fear then you will be blind to the forest because of the trees. You will never venture outside of your comfort zone physically, emotionally or spiritually because of what is unknown. And yet our fears lurk like a thief waiting to break in and rob us of our faith and security.

In his essay *Be Not Afraid* David Giuliano writes, "Fear, when it is our master, is our enemy. When we master fear, it is our friend. Then we can give our fears a seat at our inner table without putting them in charge of our lives. They can help us discern God's will for us, but we remain so much more than the sum of our fears."

When I was a child of tender years the words of Christ on my grandmother's lips inspired fear and guilt. Over time, and in burgeoning maturity, I have come to appreciate them as words of encouragement rather than of foreboding. In my fallibility I am still subject to imperfection and make mistakes in judgment and choice, but in my heart and soul I am cognizant of two truths. First, that God is loving and forgiving and desires to

give the kingdom to those who strive for it. And secondly, that I ought to be conducting myself with faith and decorum, wisdom and integrity in all that I do. Keep your eyes and your hearts open, and keep the home fire burning in preparation for the return of the king. Amen.