

A sermon preached by the Revd RL Ficks III at Church of the Good Shepherd, Houlton, Maine on the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost (8/11), 2019

Genesis 15:1-6; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12:32-40

Some many years ago, my wife, Ann, and I had the opportunity to travel for almost a month through Northern England and Scotland. It was a glorious trip, and we are most grateful that the chance to make it presented itself.

My memories of those weeks are numerous and will, I am certain, remain with me always. One of them came back to me with considerable force as I was reflecting on this morning's readings...especially the one from Luke's Gospel.

It was a late afternoon. Ann and I were driving down a small road outside Durham. Showers were passing, and the sunlight was of that sort peculiar to nowhere else so much as England. Shafts of light piercing dark clouds which scudded across the sky and then, suddenly, blue sky and warm sun. The rapeseed plants were glowing across the fields...a yellow warmth that mirrored the sun. We had a thermos of tea and decided to pull the car over and walk into one of the fields. About a hundred yards into the field was a grass-covered mound that looked like a good place to sit and view the countryside and enjoy our tea.

We got to the mound and climbed up five or six feet and sat down. Enjoying our tea and the view, we didn't much notice what was right close at hand for a time. Eventually, I did notice that the mound upon which we sat was actually a collection of moss and grass covered stones. Looking more closely, it became quite obvious that we were sitting on the ruin of an ancient fortress that had been of considerable magnitude. My mind tried to picture it...large building stones, an iron-barred door, narrow windows starting at the more difficult-to-reach second story, perhaps a walkway on the roof from which to defend against attackers, the family safe within...sealed away from a hostile world...all its uncertainties and violence. And yet, here, I have no idea how many centuries later, it lay in ruins...the inhabitants long gone...whatever wealth and valuables it protected no longer even there...its history obliterated.

It was, and remains, a silent fable for our time...a time of gated communities, elaborate alarm systems, and collective fear and uncertainty in an uncertain world...a time of withdrawing and preserving...a time of hesitation...a time of circling the wagons and avoiding risk.

All of these are entirely understandable responses to a world that seems unusually harsh and filled with much of late that few of us have experienced in the course of our lifetimes...trumpets and alarums and things that go bump in the night.

Jesus says to his followers, "Fear not little flock, for it is the Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." He goes on to say to them that, in an age of uncertainty and fear, their response to such a reality ought to be to "sell (their) possessions and give alms; to provide (themselves) with purses that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail...for where (their) treasure is there will (their) hearts be also..."

They must seek, above all else, to look outside themselves...outside their own personal uncertainties and fears...to remain engaged with a world of which they are apart...a world that needs their care and their commitment.

In short, Jesus is calling them to recognize that, no matter how we seal ourselves away...no matter how disengaged from a troublesome world we will ourselves to become...we cannot escape the truth that no matter how we might try, that which we would hide away will not, somehow, defy all we know of reality, and last forever. It is the reality to which those mossy stones upon which Ann and I had our tea bear witness.

Jesus is not suggesting for a moment that we ought to act stupidly or unadvisedly regarding the things of this world...but he is absolutely clear that we must be exceedingly careful that, in being prudent, we do not become victims of a thinking that hides us, and all our God-given gifts, behind a fortress that makes it impossible for them ever to be of service in, and to, the world they were given us to serve.

In what was often his fashion, he is making his point rather strongly. "Sell all you have...find your treasure in heaven." Perhaps not something exactly literal (even Jesus had to eat and have shelter and warmth)...but, clearly, a powerful statement regarding where we put our priorities.

You see, imparted in all this is wisdom that strikes me as teaching us that, even in fearful times, in fact, particularly in fearful and uncertain times, if we hide away...secure behind monumental walls...we have also hidden away those gifts we might actually bring to bear on easing the fearful state in which we may find ourselves. It is our gifts of communicating with each other...of sharing our journeys in community...of recognizing that we all share in the life of one another...of reaching out to those in most immediate need and distress.. it is all these gifts and myriad more...that allow us to reach that treasure that does not fail...the eternal love of God for God's creatures as made manifest through human actions.

It requires much faith to risk such thinking...faith of the sort that allowed Abram (shortly to be renamed Abraham) the courage to risk everything and journey forth, leaving all behind, to become the progenitor of a multitude...a multitude amongst which we are numbered. Faith the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews likens to something "hoped for but not seen."

I guess, one must admit, along with that writer, that none of this can be proved. It is, indeed, a matter of faith. But one, by definition, must put faith in something. Is it to be stoves and gates and isolation, or is it to be that treasure that does not grow old...that treasure in the heavens become ours on earth (if we will claim it) through the incarnation of him who came down from heaven to sanctify life on earth...even life amidst all its vicissitudes and uncertainties?

I have a good friend and mentor, who guided me throughout my time in seminary. He was wont to say, "I don't really know where I am going, but I do know how I am going to get there."

In truth, I wonder if any of us has anything more than that we can say...and then, live out in our lives? I suspect not.