

The Temptation of Distraction
Luke 12:32-40
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
August 11, 2019
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We were driving down the street one day heading toward the congregation I then served. It was a street I drove down often, my usual route to the office. “When did that building go in?” I asked. “It’s been there about 20 years,” Jim responded.

While my first reaction was to question if he was just trying to confuse me, I finally settled on the reality that he was right. It wasn’t the first time I’d seen it. To the contrary, I’d driven past it almost daily for years. And yet, while it had been there all along, it was the first time I *really* saw it, the first time I put the energy into paying attention.

The reality is that there is so much in this world that is easy to miss if we aren’t looking for it. You need only buy a new vehicle to experience this. When you sign the paperwork in the car dealership’s office you may feel lucky to have discovered this wonderful make and model of car. But give it a few days and you will suddenly be aware of how many other people had already made that discovery; how many other people are driving that exact same vehicle that you had never noticed before.

And it’s not just buildings and cars we sometimes miss. It is also the presence of God, who shows up in so many ways and times and places, but from whom we are too often distracted.

Today’s text is an interesting one. Part of what makes it interesting is that we read verses 32-40. This is the way the lectionary, the list of scripture readings for each Sunday, has divided this reading. And for many of us this seems an interesting choice, especially since we are used to

reading from publications of the Bible that have added in paragraphs and breaks and headings where the original language didn't contain them.

So, we typically hear the first few verses of today's reading connected with what comes before them – the story about the man whose answer to having a lot was to build bigger barns and Jesus' subsequent reminder not to worry. We usually hear verses 32-34 as words to close out that section which talks about greed and worry. So, in the typical reading those passages end with, "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."¹

Then we move on to this story about the slaves being ready, even in the middle of the night, when their master returns home. And typically, when we do that, we really do move on. We start reading as if it is unconnected to what came before. "Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit..."² We read it and we hear it as if it is a new topic. Specifically, we've been trained to hear it as if it is a passage about Jesus' return or meeting God in heaven after our own deaths. So, we traditionally hear this as a warning that we better be ready, that we better get our hearts, souls and lives in order, so that when we meet Jesus we will have earned the heavenly prize.

So, I find myself glad that the lectionary cut the reading the way it did, that it included 32-34 as the beginning of this passage. Because it builds a bridge back to those previous words from Jesus and keeps them connected. And, in doing so, causes us to hear this passage about readiness differently. It reminds us is that being ready to receive the gifts of God is not separate

¹ Luke 12:32-34, NRSV.

² Luke 12:35, NRSV.

from our experiences of worry and greed, of possessions and treasure. Rather, these are often the very things that get in the way of our being ready for and our looking for God. These are the very things, among others, that keep us distracted.

I also appreciate the way the lectionary puts verse 32-40 together because it seems, in our traditional reading, we are too eager to hear this passage as a warning rather than an invitation. But hearing all of these verses together makes that harder to do. As Audrey West writes, “The consistent message throughout this passage is not, ‘Be ready so that you will avoid punishment,’ but, rather, ‘Be ready so that you will receive blessing.’”³

This is important for us to hear because even we “good church people” are often hesitant to truly accept grace, to truly believe that God loves us even amidst our faults and failings, to truly believe that we don’t have to earn God’s love in order to experience it.

And it is important for us to hear because even we good, welcoming, loving people all too often act as bouncers keeping people out rather than ushers who welcome people in. We all too often set barriers in the way of people feeling welcome here in the church and in God’s kin-dom rather than throwing wide open the doors of welcome.

So, what would happen if we really listened to what Luke tells us Jesus said? What would happen if we internalized, not a fear that we won’t be ready, that we’ll be asleep or unprepared or simply not good enough for God to love us...but what if instead we heard what verse 32 says – that it is God’s good pleasure to give us the kin-dom? What if instead we heard what verses 37 and 38 tell us – that when God shows up, it isn’t for punishment or to sit us down as if we have been called to the heavenly principal’s office, but rather that God is showing up to serve us, to set a bounty of goodness before us, to take care of us?

³ Audrey West, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 3* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 338.

Over the past two weeks we have been talking about common temptations – those things that we too often give into, sometimes without even realizing it, that keep us separated from God and neighbor. Specifically we have talked about the temptations of walking by – of not paying attention to the needs of those around us or of noticing those needs but choosing our own security or our own schedules or our own bigotries instead of responding. And we have talked about the temptation of greed – the temptation to think only of ourselves when we consider how we use the resources at our disposal, our temptation to let what we own and what we strive for get in the way of our relationships with people and with God.

The reality is that these, as well as other common temptations, are among the things that keep us so entangled, so distracted, that we miss the presence of God right here with us. So often our fear and our selfishness, our addiction to stuff and money and power, our inability or unwillingness to put ourselves in the shoes of another...these things all distract us in such ways that, just as I drove past that little building for years without taking note, we can glide right past the presence of God in our midst.

And isn't that funny? Here we are – in a world where there are many options of how to spend our Sunday mornings – here we are, choosing to be part of a worshipping community...choosing to say in our actions that we are seeking the presence of God. And yet, how many, many times have we been so distracted by our own busy schedules, by our own priorities, by the energy it takes to accumulate and then protect what we have accumulated, by our own bigotries and prejudices, by our own desires...how often have we been so distracted by these very things that we haven't even noticed God who is not only showing up but who is wanting to give us even more goodness than we could ever imagine?

So, what do we do? How do we stay alert and ready to notice God's presence? Well, friends, I suspect none of you will be surprised to hear me say there is no one, simple formula. But there are certainly some practices we can embrace.

What would happen if we slowed down? If we simply took time to pay attention to the people and world around us? To stop and smell the roses? To pause and watch a child at play? To talk to our neighbors when we are out pulling weeds? To strike up a conversation in the check out line? To ask a question and actually listen to the response?

What would happen if we took time to pray? Not only prayers in church but to sit in silence and simply see what pops up? To make lists of things for which we are grateful? To read scripture, not to be the smartest person in the room or to prepare for a lesson, but to read scripture to simply notice what we might have read past before? To pause before we react, especially when we are scared or angry, and to seek God's presence? To pray with our hands and feet as we meet people where they are?

And what would happen if we made a commitment, not to be perfect, but to be intentional about living in Jesus' ways? What if we chose to love our neighbors in active ways even when it would be easier not to? What if we chose to share what we have even when we are surrounded by messages of accumulation? What if we chose to create space for people who are new, who are different, who are pushed aside...not just space to sit quietly in the back, but space to be real and to share their stories and to help make us better?

All of these are about making room for God. They are about readying our hearts and lives to welcome God's presence. They are about being ready to receive the gifts of goodness that God so eagerly wants to share.

And so, we pray together a prayer of confession as we recognize that we have been distracted and as we strive to live lives open to God's presence. As we pray, I invite you, when you hear me say, "Too often we have been distracted from you," to respond, "Forgive us, O God." Let us pray.

Leader: God, there are so many things in this world vying for our attention and often it is the loudest, the brightest, the biggest, the most demanding that we turn to. Yet today we acknowledge that often you are in the small, the quiet, the still, the weak, the different. Help us to pay attention and to be on the look out for you because too often we have been distracted from you.

People: Forgive us, O God.

Leader: God, we acknowledge that sometimes it's not even that we don't notice you, but that we don't want to notice you. Sometimes we turn away because you ask us to do what is right and what is right is often not easy. Sometimes we turn away because you ask us to care for our neighbors and we would rather invest only in ourselves. And so we acknowledge that too often, even by choice, we have been distracted from you.

People: Forgive us, O God.

Leader: Forgive us, O God and shape us to have eyes ready to see when you show up, ears ready to hear your call to compassion, lives ready for you, that we might receive and share the bountiful gifts of your goodness. Amen.