

VIATICUM—FOR THIS JOURNEY

(09/03/2023)

Scripture Lessons: Deuteronomy 30:11-14

Luke 18:18-30

“When Jesus heard this, he said to him, ‘There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’” (Luke 18: 22)

Our gospel reading, the account of Jesus' conversation with the rich young man, is ostensibly about our attachment to material possessions and how that attachment can distract us from the deeper meaning of life. This morning, on communion Sunday, as we prepare to experience the presence of our Lord in and through the Sacrament of Holy Communion, I would like us to think about the passage from a different point of view, to explore what it might be telling us about the heart of the Christian faith. From this perspective the important words are not "Go, sell all that you have," but rather Jesus' invitation, "Come, follow me."

Look around you. How many people are with us in church this morning? Not many! This is because, as a recent PEW study has documented, many if not most people in our secular society feel no need for religion. They feel no inclination to be a member of a church community, to serve on boards and committees, teach in the church school, or be involved in mission outreach. They do not participate in Sunday worship, read the Bible, study, pray, or receive the sacraments. They have adopted this stance not necessarily because of any negative feelings about the church (though, as the PEW study has noted, this is a factor for many), but because of their theology, their understanding of what the Christian faith is all about.

In my premarital counseling with young couples, I raise what I believe are some of the fundamental dynamics or issues of married life. We talk about how they resolve conflicts, their personality styles and typology, their patterns of communication. We talk about how their finances will be handled and by whom. We talk about their relationship with their parents and their in-laws. We explore their feelings about having children and the matter of gender roles. We talk about their goals as individuals, how they plan to achieve them, and how they plan to help each other achieve them.

BTW, my premarital counseling, and also my marital counseling, is exactly the same whether the couple is straight, gay, cisgendered, or where one or both of the partners is trans. No matter where you fall on the sexual orientation or gender identity spectrum, let me assure you: the issues you will face in your attempt to create a beautiful, a meaningful, a loving marriage will be the same.

Allow me to walk down memory lane in noting that the first time I did relationship therapy with a gay couple was back in 1977. I had just finished my doctorate at Boston University and had an office on Beacon Street. Since I was already a clinical member of the American Association of Marriage & Family Therapists, a gay couple looking for therapy contacted me and asked me if I did relationship therapy with gay or lesbian couples. Remember, gay and lesbian couples could not get legally married, nor could they have a wedding ceremony within most churches back then.

I told the couple that I had never done therapy with a gay couple, but I would certainly be willing to try with one condition: they had to be patient with me when I asked stupid questions. They agreed and we began our work together. I remember when, in the intake session, I asked which of them was the husband and which was the wife. They responded, "That's stupid question #1." I think in the space of the year we worked together, I didn't get beyond five stupid questions (or to be honest, maybe it was ten). But for the life of me, I couldn't discover any dynamics in their relationship that did not apply to any heterosexual couple with whom I had worked!

Apropos of the insight I just shared, I would note how delighted I was to learn this past week that the City of Boston is no longer requiring people applying for a marriage license to specify their gender or sexual identity. They are just two people who are asking to be legally married—which is as it should be! As Kimberly Rhoton, who works in Mayor Wu's office, who identifies as nonbinary, and who received the first gender-neutral marriage certificate put it, "A marriage certificate is a symbol of love and commitment." I totally agree, and I am proud that the City of Boston (though not the Commonwealth of Massachusetts yet), along with the states of California, New York, and Washington, are removing one more barrier to inclusion for our LGBTQ citizens.

Returning to my premarital counseling, I talk with the couple about the experiences they have had in the churches they have attended, about the role religion plays in their lives and will play in the life of their family.

Let me share a characteristic response of many young and some not-so-young people. "Religion, now that's an interesting topic. I think religion basically teaches us to follow the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule. Religion is meant to help us lead a good life, to treat people fairly, and I try to do this in my daily life."

When I ask them what part the church plays in their lives, a characteristic response is, "To be perfectly honest, Reverend, the church isn't important to me. I don't need the church or the worship service or even the Bible to tell me how I should live. I know what's right and wrong, and I don't need to dress up and go sit with a bunch of

hypocrites every Sunday morning to be told the same thing time and time again. Church may be fine for some people, but I don't get anything out of it. And I don't want to go if I don't get anything out of it because that would make me a hypocrite just like them."

I don't know why the person believes that everyone here this morning, everyone who is a member of this community of faith, is a hypocrite. Of course, in one sense we are all hypocrites: we talk the talk, but we don't always walk the walk. This is certainly true of me! However, we do a lot of beautiful things in this church. We reach out to each other and the world in a caring, compassionate, healing way. I also don't know why they think we all dress up in our Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes—that's so 1950's—but you can certainly dress up if you like! I also don't know why people think that all of my sermons are about the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule. They obviously haven't checked out the sermons that are posted on our church website!

I also begin to wonder why they want to be married in a church if the church means little or nothing to them. Is it because we have a photogenic sanctuary? But I usually don't ask this question. I have found that if we reach out to the unchurched in love, we increase the odds that they will turn to us when they are going through a difficult time.

Going back to our imaginary friend, however, I can understand his/her response. If religion is basically about helping us lead a good or moral life, then perhaps we don't need church, we don't need worship, we don't need the sacraments, we don't need disciplined study or prayer or meditation. How many times do we need to hear a sermon on the Ten Commandments or the Golden Rule? If this is what religion is all about, I'm not so sure that people need the church.

The rich young man in our reading from the gospels this morning is a good illustration of this point. He grew up in the Jewish faith with its emphasis on the Law. He knew the 613 dietary, cultural, and religious laws prescribed by Moses and God, and he lived them the best he could. But the man had a feeling that something was missing in his life. He had not experienced what Jesus talked about as the mysterious realm, the kingdom of God that lies within us.

In their encounter, Jesus, as he so often does, touches the man at his growing edge. He tells him, "You are correct. It's important to obey the laws of your religious tradition, but there's more to life than this. Let go of the religious and cultural traditions by which you have defined yourself, and come, follow me." But the man had too much invested in where he was and who he was. It wasn't just that he had a lot of money. He was not ready to undertake the journey that Luke says was characteristic of Jesus' life

and the followers of Jesus. Because he was not willing to undertake this journey, he turned away sad.

BTW, Jesus collapses the 613 laws of the Old Testament into just two when he tells us to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. If we just do this, it will be more than enough!

To be sure, Christianity *is* concerned with social responsibility, with the way we live our life. The theme of the 2023 Parliament of the World's Religions that I recently attended in Chicago focused on this theme—the theme of religion in the world, religion addressing the problems, the social injustices of our world. Remember, Jesus begins by advising the man to hold fast to the laws of his tradition. He tells us it is important to live a good and moral life, but he also tells us that life is more than this.

If you recall, Jesus and his disciples broke or disobeyed the law several times, perhaps even to make this point. Jesus described himself as an eater and drinker in contrast to John the Baptist, who was an ascetic. Jesus healed people even when to do so broke the laws of the Sabbath. He held the Publican, the repentant sinner to be greater or deeper spiritually than the Pharisee, the righteous, law-abiding citizen. He held the Prodigal Son to be greater or deeper spiritually than the upright elder brother. If we take these passages seriously, we are led to the conclusion that Christianity cannot be reduced to a simple obeying of social and religious laws.

Whenever people have grasped this dimension of Jesus' teaching, they have been struck by both its power and its absurdity! The apostle Paul tells us we are saved by our relationship with the living Christ, not by our good works. Augustine tells us: "Be a Christian and do whatever you want." Martin Luther tells us we are saved by faith. Paul Tillich, the twentieth-century theologian, tells us that Christ frees us from religion. These religious giants are saying that there is more to life than being a good person, more to life than obeying the religious and secular laws. This is what Christianity offers us and calls us to experience. This "something more" is what has been described as a journey.

People have struggled to grasp the meaning of life as a spiritual journey since the beginning of recorded time, and their religions and mythologies are filled with accounts of journeys. We can feel the power of this metaphor in the old Christian emphasis on a pilgrimage. In the church sanctuary, which was designed by the ancients to symbolize this journey, the center aisle is the Way. In early Christian traditions, the baptismal font was located in the back of the church, at the beginning of our journey. The congregation sits on the sides, along the Way. The lectern and the pulpit, the scriptures, and the sermon, the interpretation of the scriptures, are ahead of us to guide us. The communion

table, the symbol of union with Christ; the altar, a symbol of sacrifice; and the cross, a symbol of death and rebirth, stand at the very end as the goal of our temporal earthly journey, and then as the beginning of a journey into eternity!

I would note that the design of the sanctuary and its symbolic meaning suggests that people who sit toward the front of the church are a lot further along in their spiritual journey than the people who sit in the back pews—and even further than those who sing in the choir. Just saying!

The ancients describe life as a pilgrimage. Some even grasped that this journey does not lead us outward, does not necessarily lead us on a pilgrimage to sacred places like Jerusalem, Mecca, or Mount Kailas, but rather leads us inward, into the deeper parts of ourselves. The writer of Deuteronomy says,

For this commandment which I command you this day is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up for us to heaven, and bring it to us, that we might hear it and do it?" Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will go over the sea for us, and bring it to us, that we might hear it and do it?" But the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you can do it. (Deut. 30:11)

God's Word is very near to you, nearer to you than you are to yourself. Even if you don't know it, it is in your heart as the Holy Spirit.

From the inception of his ministry, we realize Jesus is on a journey, a journey that leads him outwardly to Jerusalem, to his death, but also an inward journey, a journey through which he works out his own unique destiny, his special relationship with God, with humanity, with us. This journey is not reducible to the observance of religious or secular laws; it is concerned with the gradual revelation to himself and his followers of who he is and what his message is. Jesus invites his disciples to break free of their attachment to their old identity and to accompany him on this journey.

The journey to which Jesus called his disciples was not a walk in the park. It involved heartbreak and suffering, times in the wilderness, the continual temptation to turn back. It involved a profound lack of outward or secular security, a putting behind of cherished things and people. It involved suffering, chaos, death, hell, and then resurrection, rebirth, new life. Time and time again we hear the words, "Come. Come and follow me." This is Jesus' call to the spiritual journey!

Jesus of Nazareth called people of his day to this journey. The eternal Christ, the Holy Spirit who dwells within calls us to this journey, the journey toward new life. The Holy Spirit calls us to know ourselves as incarnations of God. The Holy Spirit calls us to

know the God who speaks to us and lives through us in many different ways. The Holy Spirit calls us to a new awareness of the Presence within us, of where this Spirit would lead us, of what it would have us become. We are given the tools, the guidance, and companionship for this journey. We are also told that it is never too late to start!

This is what the Christian faith would offer, to which it calls us, and this is not reducible to leading a good or moral life.

In the Roman Catholic tradition, the communion given to a person at the time of his/her death is known as the *viaticum*. The meaning of this term is literally, "bread for the journey." The priest tells the communicant, "Receive, my brother or sister, this food for your journey, the Body of our Lord Jesus Christ, that He may guard you from the wicked enemy and lead you into everlasting life."

Our Sacrament of Holy Communion, a Sacrament of Presence, is also "bread for the journey," the journey of life, the journey which hopefully brings us closer to God and the true meaning of our lives. In Martin Luther's words, it provides us with "strength for the Way." Let us so partake.

*A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
September 3, 2023*

An audio version of this sermon will be posted on our church website later this week.

RESPONSE TO THE WORD—A CALL TO STEWARDSHIP

This morning I would like us to return to one more part of the Lebanese mystic Kahlil Gibran's book entitled "The Prophet," specifically the section where "the prophet" teaches us about giving. The prophet, whom we might view as the archetype of the wise teacher within us, or whom we might view as Jesus, Buddha, Lao Tzu, or other spiritual teachers, tells us,

*It is well to give when asked, but it is better to give unasked, through understanding.
And to the open-handed the search for one who shall receive is joy greater than giving.
And is there aught you would withhold?
All you have shall someday be given;
Therefore, give now, that the season of giving may be yours and not your inheritors.*

Gibran seems to be telling us that the motivation we should have for our giving, the giving that enriches our soul, should not be that we are asked, demanded, or manipulated into giving. Our motivation for giving should be that we understand that there is a need, a need that we can meet, a need that we can address in our giving. We give because we must; it is our nature, just like the flower freely and joyfully releases its fragrance simply because it has to, for that is the meaning and purpose of its life.

Gibran confronts our tendency to grasp, to hoard, to keep for ourselves out of the fear that someday, if we give, there may be nothing left for us. Of course, this reminds us of Jesus' teaching. Jesus once told a parable about a rich man who had so much that he had to build bigger and bigger buildings to hold his vast wealth. I think we would call him a hoarder, and, as we know, the basic dynamic that underlies hoarding is a lack of trust in life. Jesus, in the parable, says that the man was foolish to live life this way. When the man dies that very night, who will become the possessor of his vast wealth? Jesus tells us that it is better to store up treasure in heaven, a treasure from which we cannot be separated--even by death.

It is in this spirit that we give, and it is in this spirit that we bless the gifts that we share this morning with our church and the many gifts we will share with the world in the week to come.