8th Sunday after Pentecost  
August 4, 2019  
Luke 12:13-21  
Sermon series: The Way of Love -  
7 spiritual practices for living a Jesus-centered life  
2nd of 7 – “TURN”

Collect for 2nd Sunday in Lent:

“O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy: Be gracious to all who have gone astray from your ways, and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of your Word, Jesus Christ your Son; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, forever and ever. Amen.”

The popular Shaker hymn “Simple Gifts”, concludes with these words: “When true simplicity is gained, to bow and to bend we will not be ashamed. To turn, turn will be our delight, till by turning, turning we come round right.” These lines were written as “quick dance” instructions. The song was sung and when worshipers heard the word “turn”, they followed the words and physically turned their bodies, changing the direction in which their dance was moving.

Today is the second of a seven part sermon series on The Way of Love – 7 spiritual practices for living a Jesus-centered life. The series began last week focusing on the discipline of “PRAY”. Today’s focus is the spiritual practice of “TURN”.

Today’s gospel reading opens with a man turning toward Jesus, wanting him to settle a dispute with his brother about division of an inheritance. He wants Jesus to fix it, to be a problem-solver. But Jesus refuses to be a problem-solver. Instead he chooses to plant seeds which could change the direction of this man’s and all Jesus’ hearers’ lives. “Take care!” – Jesus says. “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” Using one of his favorite teaching tools, Jesus then tells a parable.

There are two actors in Jesus’ story. The first one we meet is a rich man enjoying a bumper crop of grain. The harvest is so plentiful that his barns are not big enough to store all the grain. The rich man turns to himself. To his own logic and problem-solving ability. Takes up an inner dialogue. “What can I do? My barn isn’t big enough for this harvest. I know. Here’s what I’ll do: I’ll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. Then I’ll gather in all my grain and goods, and I’ll say to myself, Self, you’ve done well!
You’ve got it made and can now retire. Take it easy and have the time of your life!” *(The Message)*.

The farmer’s conversation contains only one perspective – his own. His solution to the grain storage problem indicates that this man has serious “I” trouble. He is following, as one commentator called it, “an Unholy Trinity of “me, myself, and I”. He lives with a very limited field of vision. His wealth is his wealth, to do with as he pleases. The other actor in the story who is always present, but mostly silent, is God.

I’ve been pondering a few things that aren’t in Jesus; story. I wonder if at any point the rich man considered pausing for just a moment to thank God, and ask God for direction about how to use wisely the abundant harvest he had reaped?

And I wonder, if at any point, the man might have momentarily stopped, and thought about his community. Turned his gaze away from himself toward his neighbors who might be in need, or who might want to join him in celebrating his good fortune. He might even have chosen to show generosity and share his abundance, so there would be no need to spend his money, time and energy on building a bigger barn for storage.

According to the story, a sudden and unexpected “dead-end” is coming to the rich man in the not too distant future. Eugene Peterson in his paraphrase of the Bible called *The Message*, concludes this story: “Just then God showed up and said, ‘Fool! Tonight you die. And your barnful of goods – who gets it?’ ‘That’s what happens when you fill your barn with Self and not with God.’”

Something other than God had taken the most prominent place at the center of the rich man’s life. Pride, greed, unbridled selfishness – however we describe it, we may have met someone like this rich farmer. Maybe even we, in our worst moments, have given something other than God the most prominent place in our hearts.

The truth is anything can become an idol for us. All throughout scripture, what frequently takes God’s place in people’s lives is love of money and desire for more wealth, followed closely by the desire for power over others. In Luke’s gospel, Jesus has a lot to say about staying awake to the possibility of wealth and greed edging God out of first place and becoming a hindrance to discipleship.
Thankfully, the Christian faith tradition offers ways for us to actively practice turning toward God. In our worship, there is the communal act of praying a prayer of confession, and hearing the good news pronounced of God’s forgiveness of our sins. The daily office of Morning Prayer begins with a prayer of confession. There is the grace-filled sacramental rite we have in the Episcopal Church called the reconciliation of a penitent – private confession shared with a priest (p. 446, The Book of Common Prayer).

At the end or beginning of our day, we can use what’s called a spiritual “examen”. This is simply taking time to review the day. To gently look over the past day with God and give thanks for the moments when we sensed God’s grace and chose to turn toward God. And then to identify the points at which we resisted, instances when we turned away or aside from God. We then ask for forgiveness, and God’s help and the grace to choose to turn toward God in the day to follow. This is what conversion looks like for us as Anglican Christians. It is a lifelong process of turning, turning, and turning again toward the One who loves us, to be shaped into the likeness of Christ. Relying on God’s mercy. Choosing grace. And surrendering to God’s love which transforms us, so that we think with the mind of Christ, and our words and deeds flow from the heart of Christ.

Now here is what I have noticed so far about the strengths of this All Saints congregation’s spiritual practice of turning toward God.

In our worship, we turn toward God when we offer prayers of intercession for others and for our nation and the world. We turn toward God when we ask for faithfulness and strength to resist evil and injustice, and the courage to speak up for mercy and justice, to defend those whose voices are silent. I know you turned toward God by showing care and loving support of Madre Liz in your time together. In ministries of outreach – the PAL program, sponsoring a refugee family, through Fishes and Loaves providing neighbors food assistance, offering church space for A.A. group meetings, and the faithful prayers on the prayer chain and ministers offering prayers for healing, the Tuesday Bible study and Thursday spirituality group – all these are ways we are actively practicing turning toward God.

The Holy Eucharist reminds us that we only turn toward God because God has first turned toward us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Our returning to God is the continued transforming work of Christ in us through the Holy Spirit.
The point of this spiritual practice of turning toward God and neighbor is to help us become rich toward God, to learn to value what God values most. And then to live out those values of love and justice as Jesus taught and lived. Turning is a spiritual discipline that is only strengthened by repetitive practice. I find great comfort and hope in the Benedictine approach to the spiritual life captured in the phrase – “Always we begin again”.

Essayist Debie Thomas reflecting on the gospel passage this week wrote in the webzine Journey with Jesus:

“Be rich toward God. Don’t shy away. Be brave and wrestle with what this invitation means, because the richness we spend on God is the only richness we’ll keep in the end.” (Journey with Jesus, “Rich Toward God”, 7/28/19).

Amen.