

SERMON: AUGUST 5, 2007 ST. CHRISTOPHER'S

IN THE NAME OF GOD CREATOR, REDEEMER, AND SUSTAINER:

“ONE’S LIFE DOES NOT CONSIST IN THE ABUNDANCE OF ONE’S POSSESSIONS.”

As many of you may know, my husband David and I moved to Chatham this past March from England. We had been living overseas for the past seven years. During that time, we still had a house in Maryland which we sold when we decided to relocate to Chatham a few years ago. When we moved from England in March we then had to put together the two houses into a much smaller space. That has been an interesting challenge to say the least.

To add to that, just a few weeks ago we started some renovation work on our house. As construction began, we had to close off parts of our home and move furniture, clothing, paintings and other stuff into an even smaller portion of the house. As a result the basement is full and every closet is bursting at the seams. When we walk around the house we make our way through pathways of things. Whenever I look around with any thought of thinning things out, I see the evidence of our lives together over the past 39 years. There are things from our children and grandchildren. There are mementos from all the places we have lived and the countries we have visited, not to mention our hobbies and collections. It seems that our possessions have almost taken over our lives. So where do we begin to make a change?

This past week, I attended a meeting that was exploring how we might start a lay school of theology here at St. Christopher's. We looked at possible times to have classes and how we might begin the process. At our next meeting together we will look further at what it is that we hope to accomplish and offer with such a school. As I thought about that for myself and also began to prepare for today's sermon it occurred to me that we have been looking at a school of sorts over the past several weeks as we have been making our way through portions of Luke's Gospel.

It was a common thing for people to follow charismatic leaders who offered them new ways to look at and live their lives. There were some who followed people into the desert to live an ascetic sort of life separate from others. Some followed John the Baptist as he preached repentance as a way to be ready for the coming of the Messiah. Those who followed these leaders were called disciples, which is another word for students. To be a disciple means something more than being a student who signs up to take a class at a university. A disciple is someone who believes in what their teacher preaches and teaches so much so that they may choose to give up their current life to follow that teacher wherever they may lead them.

Those who followed Jesus as disciples did just that they left their families and gave up their livelihoods. When we use the word disciples in reference to those who followed Jesus we are not just talking about the twelve who were named as disciples. All who believe and follow Jesus is his disciple.

Jesus spent his time with his disciples, his followers of all sorts and conditions teaching them the things they needed to know for themselves and their continued life as disciples that would come when he was no longer with them. Jesus taught them by word and example. He taught them with lectures of sorts, with stories, with the give and take of questions and reflection. He referred to scripture and taught them to look at what it said and then encouraged them to see how

it applied to their own lives and the lives of those around them. The goal being that they would come to know something of God's love, God's kingdom, God's forgiveness, God's presence, and God's promised salvation — which in the end would make a radical difference in their lives and the lives of those who came after them.

Luke's Gospel then gives us a glimpse into a school for discipleship. In the Gospel we are introduced to what could be called Jesus' foundational precepts — the two great commandments. It is on these that he builds his case for the ways in which a student, a disciple, is to live his life and make his decisions for action. It would seem from the Gospel that Jesus taught by doing a lot of talking. However, if we take a closer look, we can see that it was more of an experiential process of education. The disciples were with Jesus when he healed. They saw and heard him tell those whom he healed why and how that happened for them. He sent them out to practice their vocation. And he brought them back for reflection. As we listen to and read the Gospel of Luke (and the other Gospels, by the way), we are able to examine Jesus's methods and see something of his curriculum as well. There are lessons about who our neighbors are; there are lessons on centering one's life on God, on Christ's presence; and as we heard last week, there were lessons on prayer.

In today's Gospel from Luke, Jesus addresses greed and how that and our possessions can take us away from our focus and center on God. Jesus gives his disciples and us a very strong warning: "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

To illustrate his point, as he often did, Jesus told a story.

As the farmer looked around his fields, he could see that it would be a good harvest, in fact one of the best he had ever had. He felt proud of what he had been able to accomplish. He was doing very well. In fact, by any one's standards, he was well off. And by the standards of the small village that he lived in he was rich. Most of his neighbors lived a much harder life as they lived each day hoping to have just enough to survive. He could see, as in other years, that their harvest would barely meet their families' needs.

As he stood there calculating what he would get from the harvest, he soon saw that his barns would not hold all that he needed them to hold. For a brief moment, he thought about sharing what he had, but that moment passed before he had any time to reflect on it. He had to take care of himself. He knew exactly what he would do. He had plenty of money so he decided to tear down all of his barns to build newer and bigger ones. By the time the harvest was over the barns were finished. As he put the harvest away into storage, along with the rest of his possessions, he could see that he would have plenty for himself for years to come. He thought to himself, well now I can relax and celebrate. That night God came to the farmer. He found out that he was to die. God asked him, "All of these things that you have saved up, who will they belong to now?"

The rich man had forgotten God in his planning. He did not share his abundance with his neighbors. Not only did he not share what he had with others, He never thought about that fact that he couldn't take what he had with him. He learned that night that the only treasures that really counted in his next life were those things that he did for others, those things that he did for God.

Jesus wanted his disciples to learn something from the rich farmer. He wanted them to see that the riches that count are the ones that they give to God and the ones that they share. The life that Jesus was talking about was not the life we lead rather it is the salvation that is offered to us in Jesus' sacrifice, that brings with it God's forgiveness.

As a disciple of Jesus passed on Jesus' teaching. In his letter to the Colossians that we heard

today, Paul gives us a description for leading our lives that I suspect the farmer could have used. Certainly it is one that we can use to guide us in our own life as disciples.

“As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other, just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.”

So, as we look at our lives and at all the things that surround us which we might call possessions including more than just the things that populate our homes what do we see? Do our possessions clutter our lives to such an extent that we are unable to see beyond them? When we think about all that we have and all that we expect of ourselves and our lives do we ever ask ourselves the question: “Is God at the center of our lives?” When we try to thin things out to make room, do we ask ourselves, “What do we make room for? More things? More possessions? Or do we make sure that the room we have has God at its center? Are our riches those things that we give to God or do for God? Or do we store them up for ourselves, afraid that we will not have what we need? Jesus wanted those who followed him to know that really it is God who gives us all that we need for life. May we each come to know that for ourselves that we might then share with others the most important possession we have — God’s love.