

12 Pentecost – C

Genesis 15:1-6

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Luke 12:32-40

The text for the sermon is from the second lesson and also from the gospel:

32 'Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. ³³Sell 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. ³⁴For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. ³⁵'Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; ³⁶be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks.

“Sell your possessions. Give alms.”

You know, the truth is, I have sold my possessions many times. I have given many of them away. This is not because I am such a generous person. It is because I have moved many times in my life. I have moved thirty six times. That's right—thirty six times. You can do the math: I'm fifty-eight. If I had lived an equal time in each of those addresses I would have been on the move every year and a half or so. When you move as often as I do, you don't tend to hang on to lots of stuff (though it is true that every time I move I tell myself I have way too many sets of dishes....but I love them so much!) So though I've only ever had one tag sale, I've given *a lot* of stuff away. My motto is “travel light.” But, you know, almost nobody ever does.

Now--I have a close friend who is in her seventies. Though she has been talking, off and on, about selling her house and downsizing for years, she has never taken any steps in that direction. But a couple of months ago, a very good deal came up for an apartment that absolutely met all of her needs and she signed on. Her current pastime, preoccupation obsession and mandate is to cull through all the possessions she has amassed over the years she has lived in the house she moved into before her children—who are in their forties and late thirties—were born.

She is, as you can imagine, flummoxed by this process. Because it's daunting.

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going.... For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith he received

power of procreation, even though he was too old... Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, 'as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.'

All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland.

“Seeking a homeland.” Let me tell you, after thirty-six different moves I know what it means to be seeking a homeland. And I know equally the odd and bittersweet feeling of thinking that I had found a homeland only to discover, for one reason or another, that I had to move on, that I had to move on to a new homeland.

And since we've just come off our series of cottage meetings, let me spend a minute talking about church homelands. Where is *my* church homeland, I wonder? Is it the two churches of my childhood years, Faith Lutheran and St. Augustine's Roman Catholic, both in Lansingburgh, both filled with poignant and important memories—sitting next to my father at St. Augustine's, the father I would lose by the time I was nine, being confirmed at Faith, teaching Sunday School there, getting married there, sitting at my mother's funeral there and at her pastor's funeral there just last December. I laughed and I cried and I learned and I grew at Faith.

But maybe St. Mark's in Charlottesville, VA is my church homeland. After all, that was the church I began to attend after a six-year hiatus of not attending church at all. It was at St. Mark's that I heard the words that changed my life completely and led me into my lifelong vocation of ministry. It was this passage from Romans:

For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham

Or is St. Paul's in Denver my church homeland, where Joe and I sang in the choir, where we were youth group leaders? But surely St. Luke's in Valatie and Emmanuel in Stuyvesant Falls are some kind of church homeland for me, where I served as vicar and learned how to do parish ministry, hands on? Or what about crazy and fun Evangelical in Raymertown, where the unexpected always happened, including the organ catching fire during a Christmas Eve service and a funeral director crashing my car at a funeral?

But certainly Grace must be my church homeland since that's the church I've served the longest (so far). Or was I at home in a "foreign church"—the federated American Baptist and United Church of Christ in Schenectady that I served before coming here?

Or what about *St. John's*? Surely this must be my church homeland! I was a member here. My daughters were on the cradle roll here, one baptized here. I preached my first sermon here. Linnea took her first steps here. I am a daughter of this congregation. I was so delighted to be able to come back here to serve as your pastor. So *St. John's* must be my church homeland.

All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland.

My friend who is selling the home where she has lived for forty-five years hasn't got a lot of experience at the moving game. And those of you who were born and raised within the walls of *St. John's* church and chapel don't have a lot of experience at the changing your church homeland game. Now--I may be a pro at both of those things because circumstances have determined that I move from location to location. But let me tell you something: change is hard. Whether you do it thirty-six times or only two or three, changing your homeland is hard work.

And I don't have a lot of advice about what will make change easier, whether that change is packing up your house or making wrenching decisions about your church. Each time I've moved out of a house, packing away my children's toys, folding the clothes that no longer fit them, but which I've held onto for years anyway because they remind me of those wonderful, noisy, hectic, crazy childhood years, I cry. I cry because change is hard, moving is hard and the thirty-sixth time doesn't make it any easier. I don't know—maybe it's even harder.

Each time I've packed up my belongings from the office in a church I've served, I've shed some tears. I've gone into the sanctuary by myself and had a little cry. And a little prayer. Okay, a big prayer. Because each time I leave a parish or go to a new one, I ask God if I've done the right things for the people I've served. Have I been if not the very, very best pastor I could be—because nobody can be the very best all of the time, then have I at least been a good-enough one?

I ask myself, have I helped people, as the writer of Hebrew suggests, "to see and greet the promises" if only from a distance? Have I helped people to understand that we are always seeking a homeland and that, as *St. Augustine* said, "'Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee.'"

What a hard lesson that is: "our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee."

And yet we do get glimmers, don't we? We get the signs that help us to see and greet the promises, as the writer of Hebrews puts it and so our faith in God is nourished and sustained. We see and greet the promises, if even from a distance and so we can serve God with willing hearts and renewable joy and energy. We see and greet the promise even from a distance and that's why we come together to worship. That's why we treasure our history as a church. That's why we love our building. That's why we love our location. Because it's here, in the walls of this chapel and in the walls of our church that we have learned, as the writer of Psalm 34 tells us, to "taste and see that the Lord is good."

And yet—and yet, the followers of Jesus were never meant to stay put. Our work and our witness as the body of Christ is not to be contained within the walls of one church or another. And if you look at the handout that I provided for our cottage meetings with all those quotes about mission, there is no sense that the disciples were ever supposed to insist on some kind of status quo. Being in mission always means revising the plan, following where the need is, knowing that we may not see the outcome we desire, but trusting that the Holy Spirit is even more trustworthy than our attempts to plan for every exigency. Trusting the Holy Spirit—that's faith. But that's also tough. The eleventh chapter of Hebrews, from which our second lesson comes, begins with these famous words "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

In the weeks and months ahead, we will forge a new direction for the people of Christ who gather as the congregation of St. John's. I thank every one of you who came to the cottage meetings. I thank every one of you who has shared in verbal or written words, your ideas, your hopes, your fears and your frustration—and yes, there are genuine frustrations. Your willingness to share with me and the Council means also that you are living out an active and questing faith. It means you care about this congregation, these buildings, the work we do and have done in them, the history we have shared and the histories of those who came before us.

But besides thanking you for your commitment to this community, I want to say this to you, as well: *Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.*

God will not leave us without the signs and the greetings of promise that have sustained us all our lives. We are beloved in the Lord, which means that we can dare to live in hope for the future, not fear of it. We are beloved in the Lord, which means that we can dare to embrace change, not try to hide from it. We are beloved in the Lord, which means that we can give the gift of God's love in new ways, never doubting that it is our Father's good pleasure to give us the kingdom.

We are people seeking a homeland, but no matter where we are on our journey, not matter how many changes and new beginnings we are called to pursue, we are never without the one who will both journey with us and welcome us home.

Amen.