

Trinity 8C 07/08/2022

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Luke 12:34)

In his book *Seven habits of Highly Effective People* Stephen Covey wrote, the most important task for the individual and group is that: “The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.”

It’s one of those seemingly self-evident rules that is absolutely essential if you want to succeed at anything. In any human endeavour, if we want to succeed, we must be able to focus. Whether reroofing our house, eating a cheese sandwich, or something vastly more important than either of those, like being a Christian person or congregation. Focus on the core above all else is an essential ingredient in any kind of success.

The task which lies before us as Christians, is considerably more difficult, complex, and important than eating a cheese sandwich, yet distraction is just as big a problem in the spiritual aspect of life as it is in any other part. Even as we pursue the most important task of our lives - following Jesus - distractions arise.

The author of the gospel of Luke understood this dilemma. He has taken two separate stories or parables used by Jesus to demonstrate and warn us against the problem of distractions and put them together in the Gospel for this morning.

One is the parable of the watchmen waiting for the master of the house. The other is the story of the man whose house was broken into. In both stories we see the importance of being awake, alert, and aware, focused on the task at hand. In the first story, those who were focused were rewarded. In the second, those who were unfocused suffered painful loss. As is always the case with parables, the characters and the events which inhabit them are metaphors for life in and out of the kingdom of God.

To understand the message of the parables, we have to unpack their symbolism so that it can speak to our lives and times. Clearly the stories are speaking to us about the appropriate life of the faithful Christian. And both of the stories tell us that the faithful, Christian life is one of focused watchfulness. The watchmen are watchful for the return of their master, the wedding guest. The homeowner should have been watchful for those who would break into his home. The question before us, as Christians, is this: For what should we be watchful? What is it that we are looking for? What is it that we are waiting for? Upon what should we be focused? To put it in modern vernacular - What is the main thing of Christian living?

The main thing of Christian living is no different today than it was two thousand years ago. Two thousand years ago, the main thing of those early Jewish Christians was no different than it was for their ancestors a thousand years before that.

We find it written in the book of Deuteronomy, Chapter 6, verse 4 and following. In Hebrew it is called the *Shema*, and when Jesus was asked which commandment was the greatest, he recited it to his listeners as recorded in Matthew 22 Luke 10 and Mark 12 . Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one! And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

The task of every Christian, the main thing, if you will, is to have a personal, loving, faithful relationship with God. That was the task which challenged Abraham and compelled Moses. It was the task that empowered Joseph and frustrated David. It was that task that inspired courage in Esther and faith in Ruth, which enflamed the Maccabees, comforted Mary, impassioned John the Baptist, consumed Jesus, and drove Paul. It is that task which stands before the contemporary people of God no less now than it stood before every person of God over the past four millennia. Indeed, it is that task which stands before us this day and will stand before us tomorrow as we rise for work and school and play.

But how do we do that? What activities do we pursue? What books do we read? What rituals do we perform? What phrases do we recite? How does one have and maintain a personal, loving, faithful relationship with God? Well, scripture and experience tell us that we have a personal, loving, faithful relationship with God the same way we have a personal, loving, faithful relationship with anyone. First, we commit ourselves to having that relationship. That is, we make a commitment; we decide to be in the relationship. If we want to have and maintain a personal, loving, faithful relationship, the first thing we do is to decide and commit.

The second thing we do is be attentive. That is, we watch. No relationship is successful because we committed to it once and then put it in the back of our minds. A relationship that succeeds over time in being personal, loving, and faithful, is one that is attended to and fed regularly. This is true of marriage relationships, working relationships, parental relationships, and friendships. If these things are true in human relationships, how much more true are they in our relationship with God? If we want to have a close, personal, loving, faithful relationship with God, we must commit to the relationship and attend to the maintenance of it every time an opportunity comes along. By constantly watching, we so recognise those opportunities when they present themselves because they often appear when and from where we least expect it.

The witness of scripture and history, as well as our own experience tells us that the opportunity to renew our relationship with God can come from any direction at any time. The prophet Isaiah first heard the call and demand of God on his life while he stood in the temple during the funeral service of King Uzziah. He found his relationship with God renewed when he brought God's word to the people. Jeremiah came to know God in a dream that he had as a teenager and renewed his relationship with God through his own suffering and his work on behalf of the poor and the oppressed. Moses went to the mountaintop, David went to music and poetry, Gideon went into battle, and Paul was going to Damascus. Their encounters with God were as different as they were compelling.

John Wesley met God in a Bible study with people from another Christian denomination from his own. Mother Teresa said she saw God in the eyes of the sick and the poor to whom she ministered on the streets of Calcutta. The undeniable fact that comes to us in the lives of the saints is that God comes to us in a thousand different ways from a thousand different directions and it is up to us to be ready to discern God's presence in our lives.

But distractions abound, don't they? We get distracted by fatigue. The watchmen in the parable stand through the night near the gate and with each passing hour, the work of the day takes a heavier toll. Their eyelids become heavy and their senses dull. They want to rest more than they want to watch.

We work hard all week, on the job and at home, and when Sunday morning comes, our eyes grow heavy with the fatigue that has built in us all week and we want to trade that hour at church for just one more precious hour of sleep.

We get distracted by doubt. The watchmen in the parable stood at the gate and waited for the master's return. They didn't expect him to return immediately, so they didn't worry about it for the first few hours. But then, after a few hours, in what is called the second watch, they began to note that it was getting late and he should have been back by then. By the third watch they had given up, convinced that he wasn't coming. They just didn't believe anymore. And so it is with us. We have convinced ourselves that God always comes in a certain way at a certain hour and, when God fails to turn up as we expect, we give up.

We get distracted by false messiahs. Spend a few moments browsing through the self-help section of the books in any book shop or online and it doesn't take long to see that there are messiahs everywhere. They all have a path, a cause, a plan, a prayer, a programme, a gimmick, a gizmo, a formula, or a novelty that is going to save your life, make you more justified, authentic, richer or thinner. Our culture is a veritable breeding ground for false messiahs and they are knocking on the door of the Church. The path to a truly authentic life, we are told, can be purchased for just three easy payments of \$19.95 plus shipping and handling. False messiahs are the greatest enemies of the watchfulness that God requires of us. They distract us from our relationships with God and each other.

The parables that Luke gave us in today's gospel text are, literally, wake-up calls. He invited us to ask ourselves the crucial question of the Christian life: Have we kept the main thing the main thing? Or have we fallen asleep? Have we drifted into slumber, victims of the fatigue that our lifestyle places upon us? Have we allowed ourselves to be lulled into unbelief because God didn't do what we expected or wanted and when we expected or wanted it done? Have we been seduced by false messiahs? Have we been distracted by the promises of the flashy and the attractive, the entertaining and novel, the instantaneous? If, indeed, we find ourselves saying yes to any of these questions, then Jesus, speaking through the gospel writer Luke, says this: Wake up! Stay awake! Keep watching! The kingdom of God is coming to you when and where you least expect it. Of this you can be sure. This we can take to the bank. This we can stake our life upon. It will be! Behold, the kingdom of God is at hand. It is God's gift to us. Watch for it! It is, after all, the main thing. Amen.

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