Ninth Sunday after Pentecost August 11, 2019

All Saints Church Year C/ Proper 14

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for; the conviction of things unseen.

In the name of God who sustains our lives. Amen

Jesus tells us in this gospel lesson, “Provide yourself with purses that do not grow old.”

In other words, Jesus is giving an answer to this question: When you are in your deepest need, where do you go? To what purse do you go? Do you open? Do you hope after?

How do we answer that question? How do we provide ourselves with these kind of ***Jesus’ purses***?

When we are in our greatest need, to what do we turn? What purses do we have that will not grow old, that are always ready to be opened and to provide help?

 OR

When our own folks, friends and family, are hurting, what purses do they turn to and how do we help them to find them, or to remember them, or to claim them?

 OR

When our own nation is in great need, to where do we turn? I was sequestered away from the internet in my little house in Jaffrey, on retreat, reading, resting, so I didn’t hear right away about the terrorist attack from the white nationalist who killed (now) 22 people in the Walmart in El Paso. (With others still in critical condition).

By the way, that’s ***our*** Walmart. That’s where we always go to provide gifts and supplies for our children at Centro Victoria. Right away, I thought of Patty and everyone who travels to Juarez. They must be a wreck. Waiting to make sure everyone they know is home, safe and sound.

This terrorist attack has now become personal. I can see the parking lot, and the cashiers, and the aisles, and the expansiveness of everyone shopping. I can see Patty and Max and Sam, and Heidi and her girls, and Brian and Andres, and Evan and their joy in providing support and friendship to all those we love. My God, parents were there getting their kids ready to go back to school. It’s all so obscene.

I called Patty and left a message. I assumed all were safe as I would have heard if otherwise. But I wanted her to know that she was in my prayers. Isn’t that one of the first places we go- to the “purse” of our friends and family and community, to our hearts, to our minds, to our prayers. To that quiet place within which Jesus promises we all have.

To that deep place beyond, the lights, and the flashes and the successes, or the darkness, the weeds, and the failures…. to that place, Jesus sometimes refers to it as your closet…. To that prayerful place, beyond all the stuff that is going on, that knows serenity, hope and freedom- that quiet place. It takes a while to find it; sometimes when I am really worried or sad or outraged, or really, really happy, I don’t find it….. but it’s there; it’s a Jesus’ promise.

That prayerful place that knows that freedom’s only virtue is to pursue what God wants for us. That’s what Jesus means when he talks about what we treasure…. If we treasure what God wants for us, there are hearts will be.

If we search for our hearts desire, there will be God’s desire for us: the desire that we find our best selves, that we search for healthy fellowship, and hope for solidarity, and long for mutuality and respect for ourselves and our neighbors. Jesus is challenging us to stay awake!

But we often don’t see or we ignore this treasure, this desire, what our hearts truly need and want

In college, I read a short story by Leo Tolstoy that left an indelible mark.

The story is about a farmer who was going to be given all the land he could walk around in a day. The catch? He needed to be back to his starting point by sunset.

Of course, he walked too far, and when he realized his mistake, he began to return more briskly, and then jog, and then out and out run. Gasping for breath, heart-pounding, he called upon every bit of strength left in his body and staggered across the line just as the sun disappeared. Collapsed, blood streaming from his mouth, he died.

A neighbor dug his grave. 6 feet by 3 feet. And the title of the short story, “How Much Land Does a Man Need?” Well, I guess, only 6 feet by 3 feet.

This story had impact because in my early 20’s, I could identify with the farmer. Would I have done the same?…. In my own ambition, or worry that I didn’t have enough, in my good fortune of getting something for nothing, in my sense of my own need to accomplish and win, in my false sense of my own independence and power?...yes, I could have been that farmer, realizing my mistakes too late.

How do we practice going to the purses that do not wear out, that will endure, and not the ones that are all caught up in our ego, or in our fear of scarcity, or greed? When we are not even aware of how far off the path of love and grace we are? When we are grasping and not giving?

In the end, we need to believe that an act of trust and another act of trust and another act of trust….. will lead to a life of trust.

One of the Jesus’ purses, if ultimately, the definitive purse, is to go to our place of suffering. Suffering, which we all try to avoid, is actually the gift that Jesus gives. Jesus gave his life so that we will know that our own suffering and identifying with others who are suffering opens the way to grace and love and resurrection.

When we look to the cross, we are being asked to soften our hearts to all suffering, not just our own. Gazing to the cross, we become the parents who threw their bodies down on their two-month old child to save his life; we become that child with broken bones; we become people ducking under cover while bullets are flying; we become families waiting to hear if their loved ones made it out alive.

Gazing to the cross, we also become the gun man, or!!!! that man who dressed himself in armor and put his gun in a shopping cart and walked around a Walmart in Springfield, Missouri to pose as a threat because he thought he could and should.

We are also the President and First Lady, who, while holding the surviving two-month old, a smile flashes and a thumb goes up; we are also the family who asked for that image to be removed from public because it’s just too much of a photo-op…. too painful.

Jesus, on the cross, reminds us that we are all these things- the good, the bad and the ugly. But that is not the end of the story. The resurrection is coming. As theologian Richard Rohr says over and over again, “Jesus did not come to change God’s mind about us. It did not need changing. Jesus came to change our minds about God- and about ourselves- and about where goodness and evil really lie” (*The Universal Christ*, p. 151).

God loves us always and keeps pointing the way to our deepest hearts, even to the point of dying for us to get the point across.

Sometimes, if not often, I think Jesus is asking us to be saints and it’s just too much. Humanity is too weak to rise above our circumstances and to have hope in these purses that do not grow old.

Yet, I am comforted by Paul Tillich who has a great definition of saint: “Saint is a saint not because he is good, but because he is transparent for something that is more than himself.”

Yes, a saint is being a window of opportunity, being a means of grace, being the place which the Holy Spirit makes its dwelling. Being a saint is the vocation of ordinary people. Like the shepherds summoned to the manger; like the women at the tomb; like fishermen as Jesus’ disciples.

It is the sinners, prostitutes, tax collectors, the sick by which Christ is seen and known. The miracle of Easter is not so much that Jesus rose from the dead, but that we rise from our deaths, struggles and fears. How do we do this? We rely on our Jesus’ purses that are filled with our capacity to suffer with others and to believe that God is with us, so that we can mirror the love of God.

We find that place of being awake by identifying with the suffering. This human connection is the way to the fullness of life and love, by turning to purses that do not grow old.

Amen