

Ninth Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/C): Purses That Won't Wear Out  
Genesis 15:1-6; Psalm 33:12-22; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12:32-40  
August 6-7, 2022  
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

If you didn't already know that we follow a set lectionary, a 3 year schedule of Scripture readings, you might think the Stewardship Committee chose this summer's Gospels, especially the Parable of the Rich Fool last weekend and this week's story of Jesus telling us to sell our possessions and give alms! Jesus' challenge is preceded by these words of comfort to allay our anxiety:

*"Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."  
(Luke 12:32)*

I'm thinking the only people right now who aren't anxious about **anything** must be really heavily medicated! As if COVID weren't enough to worry about, monkeypox has been declared an international and a national health emergency. China is saber-rattling. Kentucky has been devastated by floods. France, the world's largest producer of wheat, is suffering terrible drought – and farmers in Ukraine are harvesting their crops as rockets and missiles rain down onto their fields, rather than lose the fruits of their entire growing season.

This weekend's psalm, Psalm 33, projects faith that quiets anxiety:

*...in your holy name we put our trust.  
Let your lovingkindness, O LORD, be upon us,  
even as we place our hope in you. (Ps. 33:21b-22)*

This is what Jesus tells us, too. Here's a paraphrase of today's Gospel from *The Message*:

*"Don't be afraid of missing out. You're my dearest friends! The Father wants to give you the very Kingdom itself. Be generous. Give to the poor. Get yourselves a bank that can't go bankrupt, a bank in heaven far from bank robbers, safe from embezzlers, a bank you can bank on." (Luke 12:32-33)*

"Be generous. Give to the poor" is a lot less radical than the thought of selling **all** our possessions and giving **all** the money to the poor. It's easier to hear "Be generous.... Give...." and therefore we're more likely to follow through on that simple command of our Lord. Throughout Christian history, though, some have taken Jesus quite literally and done just that. This coming Thursday we remember Clare of Assisi, Francis' soulmate and the founder of the Poor Clares, a religious order for women who embrace poverty

like Francis did, and who work with the poorest of the poor. She came from a very wealthy family and turned her back on material riches to seek spiritual riches instead. Neither she nor her community owned anything to call their own: definitely nothing for thieves to steal or moths to munch on, just *“unfailing treasure in heaven where no thief comes near and no moth destroys.”* (Luke 12:33)

Jesus’ message and the Poor Clares’ lifestyle is quite the opposite of what is called the Prosperity Gospel, preached by some televangelists and others. The Prosperity Gospel says that if you live right, God will treat you right, with both material and spiritual blessings barreling your way. Jesus preached quite a different message:

<sup>23</sup> ... “If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. <sup>24</sup> For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.” (Luke 9)

To follow the Lord **is** to be rich, but not in a way Uncle Sam will tax you on. August 10, the day **before** Clare’s day on the calendar, is a commemoration of St. Lawrence. Clare lived in the 1300’s; Lawrence lived 1100 years earlier, in the 200’s. The world changes, but Jesus’ message doesn’t, and the way to follow Him doesn’t change that much either. The big difference between the times in which they lived is that Christianity was still illegal when Lawrence lived. We think he was born of Spanish parents but know he lived in Rome. He was a deacon, a church leader set aside for “Word and service,” preaching the Gospel and serving the poor. He must have been quite an organizer and had a brain for numbers, too, because he was in charge of all the deacons in Rome, **and** he was treasurer of the Church in Rome. That was all secret and under the radar, since the persecution of Christians was fierce under the Emperor Valerian. It was so fierce that Roman soldiers caught up with the Pope, the Bishop of Rome, and all his deacons as they were celebrating Holy Communion in a cemetery. Everybody but Lawrence was killed and buried on the spot. They kept Lawrence around to demand he turn over the Church’s treasury to the Roman authorities. (No use murdering him before they got the goods....) According to one Church tradition, the soldiers gave Lawrence time to retrieve the treasure and present it to them. When they met later at an agreed upon time and place, Lawrence had gathered all the children, all the sick, aged, leprous,

diseased, disturbed members of the Church he could. He then announced to the authorities, “Here is the treasure of the Church.” It wasn’t so much a ruse as a clear statement of how Jesus sees things:

*“Whenever you did it [any act of kindness, compassion] to one of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” (Matthew 25:40)*

The Roman authorities were not amused and martyred Lawrence, a Roman citizen, on August 10, 258. He was one of the first martyrs to be commemorated by the Church. He was buried in a catacomb. The Emperor Constantine, who legalized Christianity about 50 years later, built a basilica over his tomb. Some of you may have visited it while in Rome. It is called St. Lawrence Outside the Walls (San Lorenzo fuori de Mora).

I can’t hear Lawrence’s story without remembering another story of money demanded by murderous people in Rome. This time the demand was made of Jews, not Christians. The year was 1943 and the one issuing the command was Colonel Herbert Kappler of the SS. He insisted that the Jews in Rome come up with 110 pounds of gold in 24 hours, or risk deportation to concentration camps. With the help of Christians, the Jewish community came up with 110 lbs. of gold: wedding bands and other jewelry, menorahs and assorted sacred objects, coins. The Nazis took the gold – and took the Jews as well. On October 16, 1943, just under 1,000 men, women and children were deported. Almost none came back. Previously, just **over** 1,000 Italian Jews had been sent away; only 16 eventually returned.

*“Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Luke 12:33b-34)*

Bouncing back to last week’s Gospel, the Parable of the Rich Fool: greed, avarice, covetousness underlie so much evil in this world. Christians justified pogroms, violent attacks on Jews, destruction of their property, actual murder, by calling them Christ-killers. That was false spiritual cover, a convenient **excuse** for stealing other people’s wealth and eliminating business competition. Same with colonization of the New World, enslavement or elimination of indigenous peoples: the take-over had more to do with stealing natural resources than preaching the Gospel. For **some** the goal may have been to “save souls,”

but for myriad **more**, the goal was to return to Spain, France, England, with hulls full of silver and gold, exotic spices, tobacco, free labor of the enslaved.

Herbert Kappler was sentenced to life imprisonment for his direct role in the death of thousands of Italian Jews, as well as the torture and murder of members of the Resistance. His 1<sup>st</sup> wife divorced him when he went to prison, but then he married a German nurse with whom he had corresponded from prison. A few years later he was diagnosed with terminal cancer and was transferred to a secure hospital setting. A couple years after that, his 2<sup>nd</sup> wife helped him escape prison. One story said she smuggled him out of the hospital in a very large suitcase. (He was down to 104 lbs., but that still doesn't seem likely?) Another says she lowered him out his 3<sup>rd</sup> floor window using bedsheets as ropes. They managed to make it back to W. Germany undetected. Italy demanded extradition but W. Germany refused. Kappler received welcome home bouquets, telegram well-wishes, and a neo-Nazi parade beneath his apartment windows, complete with anti-Semitic banners....

Today's Gospel ends, "You... must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour." (Luke 12:40) What will He find us doing? Being as generous, faith-filled, bold, as Lawrence who served the poor, then gave his life, as Clare who spent her life serving the Lord through the poor, as one **of** the poor, or being possessed by our possessions to the point that we ruin our own and/or others' lives? May we remember our Lord's promises, dip daily into the living water of God's grace, ours through Holy Baptism, live and love generously, and echo the psalmist, especially when our anxiety runs high:

*...in your holy name we put our trust.  
Let your lovingkindness, O LORD, be upon us,  
even as we place our hope in you.*

Amen.

Herbert Kappler, Jewish Virtual Library.

"Herbert Kappler Dies," NYT, Feb. 10, 1978.

[sojc.org/holocaustmemorial/stories/rome\\_italy](http://sojc.org/holocaustmemorial/stories/rome_italy).

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