

A Guide for Travelers on the Earth

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16, Luke 12:35-41

Non-practicing Christians

I have often heard, “I am a non-practicing Christian.” “I am a non-practicing Catholic.” I believe that God’s grace is available to all and salvation belongs to God so there is a possibility of salvation outside of the church. I do not completely deny one can be a Christian without the church or a religious institution. However, as a person who studies practical theology, I don’t know how one can be a Christian without practicing one’s faith. Without practicing faith in concrete ways such as worship, prayer and almsgiving, what they believe is merely their thought that they believe in God. Our faith is not about abstract thought or feeling that I believe in a higher power. Rather, the Christian faith is a way of life, maybe a particular way of life that makes sense only if one trusts in God. Our faith is revealed through our practices and how we use our time and possessions.

Jesus didn’t say, “For where your heart is, there your treasure will be also.” Rather, he said, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Some said, “Show me your budget, and I’ll tell you what you value.” My clergy friend once told me that if you don’t know where your heart truly is, look at your bank statement and your weekly calendar. Then, you will know where your heart truly is. How we spend our money and time honestly tell us what we value and where our heart is. Where is your heart? In today’s scripture, Jesus invites us to honestly face this question.

Money

We know that what Jesus proclaimed was always good news. However, it’s not always easy to say “Amen” to what Jesus taught us. When we hear good news like, ‘Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom,’ we are quick to say “Amen.” But when we hear, “Sell your possessions, and give alms,” it’s not easy to say “Amen,” which means “so be it!” I bet it was the same with his disciples. After hearing Jesus’ teaching about giving all one has to the poor and being on the watch for the Son of Man’s unexpected return, Peter asked, “Lord, are you telling this parable for us or for everyone?” Like Peter, most of us may hope that this text is addressed to a generic “everyone,” not directly at us because Jesus’ teaching sounds demanding and challenging.

Sharing our possessions with others is difficult. You may know the three principles on the use of money John Wesley taught. “Earn all you can, save all you can, and give all you can.” Did early Methodists follow these rules well? Sadly, No. Wesley noted that the Methodists all but ignored the third principle. Wesley wrote in 1786 in “Thoughts upon Methodism”: “... the Methodists in every place grow diligent and frugal; consequently, they increase in goods. Hence, they proportionately increase in pride, in anger, in the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, and the pride of life. So, although the form of religion remains, the spirit is swiftly vanishing away.” ... What way, then, (I ask again) can we take, that our money may not sink us to the nethermost hell? There is one way, and there is no other under heaven. If those who ‘gain all they can,’ and ‘save all they can,’ will likewise ‘give all they can;’ then, the more they gain, the more they will grow in grace, and the more treasure they will lay up in heaven.”¹ Wesley considered the failure to give the most serious threat to the Methodist movement.

¹ <https://www.resourceumc.org/en/content/john-wesley-on-giving>

Why is it so important to share what we have with others? David Lose said, “The point of almsgiving is... not to alleviate poverty, but rather to extol generosity as a mark of the Christian life.”² It’s an imitation of God who loves to give us the kingdom. In his teaching, Lose says, “What Jesus is commending is faith – faith that frees one to be generous; faith that enables one to leave anxiety behind; faith that creates in one confidence about a future secured not by human endeavor or achievement but by God alone.”³ The only way to be freed from anxiety and fear for the future is faith, and faith is the only way that leads us into generous living. However we often attempt to find a sense of security from our possessions.

Just in Case...

Summer is the season of vacations and I bet many of our church members will travel this summer. What do you need to do when you travel? You pack your luggage or backpack. As you know, I love traveling. I traveled solo for the first time when I was a freshman in college. During the summer vacation, I wanted to take a bicycle trip, so I packed my backpack with clothes, toiletries, tent, a map, raincoat, and many other essential items. As I carefully rechecked my packing list, I thought, “what will I need if my bicycle chain falls off?” So I put a screwdriver and combination pliers into the backpack. In order to touch the greasy chain, I also needed a pair of gloves, just in case. Of course, I’d need a bottle of bike chain lubricant, just in case. This ‘just in case’ list grew and grew, and my backpack got heavier and heavier. When I first hit the road, it was o.k. because I was a healthy young man. But after a few hours, the heavy weight of the backpack began to hurt my shoulders and neck. Moreover, the rain started pouring and I had to ride through a mountain pass but eventually, I made it through my first day. The next day was a struggle with the heat of the sun, thirst and another mountain. After another day of struggle, do you know what I did? I called my father to come pick me up. My first solo travel was not successful. After returning home, I realized that I had carried too much unnecessary stuff because of my worries. In fact, I didn’t use any of my ‘just in case’ items at all.

Travel lightly on the journey of life

I believe the same thing can happen on our journey of life. On our life journey, we often find ourselves weighed down by unnecessary worries and fears. To find a sense of security, we often rely on money and material possessions. Ironically, we become weighed down by the things we’ve hoarded. There is writing entitled “An Interview With God.” In that writing, a person had a dream of having an interview with God. One of the questions the person asked was “What surprises you most about mankind?” God answered: “That they get bored of being children, are in a rush to grow up, and then long to be children again. That they lose their health to make money and then lose their money to restore their health. That by thinking anxiously about the future, they forget the present, such that they live neither for the present nor the future. That they live as if they will never die, and they die as if they had never lived...” This short writing contains so much wisdom. Money is not a guarantee for security or peaceful living, free from anxiety. Faith is the only way we can overcome fear and truly live life. Instead of being trapped by things we’ve gathered for our security, we must travel lightly. Jesus calls us to release our fears and material possessions so that we might be free enough to travel where God leads.

² <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-19-3/commentary-on-luke-1232-40>

³ Ibid.

To travel lightly, first, we need to understand that we are travelers on the earth. Do you know what makes travel, travel? It's a home to return. We call people who have to move to other places or countries due to wars or other disasters, refugees, not travelers. Hebrew reminds us that our true home is not here. Ancestors of our faith knew this so "they confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth... they were seeking a homeland." Faith was the only way to see this promised land and empowered them to travel lightly on the earth as resident aliens. Because they knew the earth was not their eternal home, they traveled lightly. Instead of relying on what they've hoarded, they completely depended on God's providential care and love. Faith makes us free from anxiety. Faith makes us generous to others. In the same way, faith helps us to enjoy our life journey because by faith we can see where we eventually will return, heaven.

Think of what would be left after you stopped being afraid, sold the possessions you relied on and gave? All that would be left is you and that's what matters to God. It's you God wants. It is you God desires. So my beloved Asbury family, do not be afraid. Get rid of the 'just in case' items in your backpack and travel lightly, so that we can enjoy our earthly journey with God until we return to our heavenly place. Amen.