



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Pentecost 8 – Proper 13 Year C

#### The Uncomfortable Middle

[RCL]: Hosea 11:1-11; Psalm 107:1-9, 43; Colossians 3:1-11; Luke 12:13-21

Doesn't Jesus make you feel a bit uncomfortable, sometimes? And other times, he's maybe even more than that, even a bit annoying! Today, for example, he tells us to be on guard against all kinds of greed, that our life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.

Remember that in first-century Palestine, the number of possessions a given person had would be very, very small by comparison to many of us today. A rich man might have a small herd of goats, some farmland, and as many as three or four changes of clothing, and a poor person—then, as now—would be fortunate to have a roof over his head.

So here is Jesus warning someone who wants a fair share of the family inheritance from his brother that he may be greedy. Jesus is not talking about even modest investments, well-worn automobiles, or real estate that—while now considered modest—was once the symbol of a great American dream.

He's probably talking about a small herd of animals, a patch of farmland and a house, and a couple of changes of clothing. And, let's face it: we all have more than that. A *lot* more.

A strict literalist would read this passage and decide to sell everything and give alms to the poor. That is, by the way, exactly Jesus' instruction in the subsequent passage from Luke's gospel; we'll hear it next week.

And a more metaphorical thinker could read this and argue a way around it. What Jesus really meant is not that we should sell our possessions, but simply that we should love God and our neighbor, and then all will be fine.

Give away everything or give away nothing: can either of those extreme options satisfy us? We Anglicans have always looked for the *via media*, the middle road between the extremes.

But, here's the thing: the really uncomfortable place is in the middle, isn't it?

Most of us have some experience of being poor: living on minimum wage, life as a so-called "starving student" (which meant, often, that parents subsidized the majority of expenses). And we could avail ourselves of government entitlement programs should we become truly indigent now. (Unlike in Jesus'

time, we have a social safety net in our society. It's not perfect, but it's better than none.) We know we could live with less—far less, if we had to. That's not so very scary.

And, likewise, we imagine we could be quite comfortable with more. That's the direction most of us seek, of course. And it is where commercial society entices us. In fact, it is where most of contemporary American society lives—making little or no contribution to the work of the Church while living a life of high-tech prosperity at levels Jesus could only have imagined.

No, the really challenging place is in the middle—where we are responsible for figuring out how much to keep, and how much to give away. But this is exactly where Jesus calls us to be.

Somehow, that doesn't seem fair. Jesus, after all, had the advantage of being God. If he lived his life without sin, well that seems completely explainable. For us, it is more difficult—especially when we need to make the choices ourselves.

But, remember, Jesus never says we should try to be exactly like him; he simply invites us to follow him.

And even if we were to be like him, it would hardly conform to the picture many people consider “Christian.” Come to think of it, so much of what people consider “Christ-like” has little or nothing to do with Christ. Maybe more to do with some romantic movie or sentimental picture—but hardly the man depicted in the gospels.

For instance, Jesus could be described as many things, but “nice” is not one of them. He knocked over tables in the Temple, told people to leave their families, and in the Gospel of Mark is described as looking around at the worshippers in anger, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts.

Come to think of it, perhaps we will be much better off *following him* than emulating him!

At any rate, one thing is clear: the choice is up to us. Every moment, every hour, every day: an opportunity to indulge in greed, to give away everything, or to find the middle way.

And, as you all very well know, most of the time the choice is not very clear.

We are rarely presented with the choice between Glinda and Elphaba; the choice between the Good Witch of the North and the Wicked Witch of the West would be clear for most of us. But, sadly, our choices are rarely like that. Most of the time, we are confronted with choices that have benefits, but also ramifications and consequences—no matter what decision we make.

That is what it is to live in the middle. To stay away from the seeming safety that can be found by lurking in the margins. Yet living in the middle is what we are called to do, friends. As Christian people, we are called not to be perfect and never make a mistake—but to do the best we are able, recognizing not only our own needs but also those of others.

Because this very day your life is being demanded of you.

And there are various ways your life can be demanded. One way your life can be demanded is for you to forfeit it—to give it up. But another way your life can be demanded of you is for you to live it to the fullest.

Living one hundred three years, or arriving brand-new in this community, or fourteen years living with the death of a child, or gradually losing control over the muscles of your body, or nearly sixty years a member of a parish, or preparing to face the challenge and adventure of college—whatever your particular situation may be.

We are all called to cast away our fear and live instead in faith. To move away from the perceived safety of hiding in the margins by the woods and find our place instead in the wide-open meadow of the middle. To work, pray, and give for the spread of the kingdom of God—which, to be sure, is *unrelated* to the spread or decrease of our own personal fortune.

And in all of this journey, Jesus will find a way to comfort us in our afflictions. It comes, but that comfort doesn't always come as soon as we would like, or in quite the way we had imagined—but it comes.

And Jesus will also find a way to afflict us in our comfort. Of that, we can *also* be sure.

So, let us not sell everything we have—nor share only a tiny fraction.

Instead, together let us work, pray, and give in order to transform ourselves, our community, our society, and the whole world for the better. For such is the kingdom of God. Amen.

*Now retired, Barrie Bates has served Episcopal and Lutheran congregations in California, New York, and New Jersey over the past 20+ years. He holds a Ph.D. in liturgical studies and serves on the General Board of Examining Chaplains. He looks forward to spending more time on the shores of Lake Michigan, and he welcomes conversation about his sermons.*