

## ***Action Plan***

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT  
August 11, 2019  
Text: Luke 12:32-40

I made a change in my usual action plan for writing my sermon for today. It was such a lovely day, I decided that instead of working at the kitchen table, I would take advantage of the spectacular weather to work on my patio in the backyard. As I worked, I savored the strong breeze rustling the trees and rattling the umbrella over the patio table. I loved being surrounded by the wonder of God's Creation as we have managed to capture a piece of it in our small, urban backyard – trees we planted when we bought the house 15 years ago now towering, flowers we planted now blooming amidst the volunteers that have sprung up in their midst.

Of course, there are challenges to writing a sermon on the patio on a breezy day. I chased my papers more than once. I jumped out of my skin when the neighbor's little girl suddenly shrieked at the top of her very healthy lungs, spilling my tea in the process. I was distracted by the almost overwhelming desire to deadhead my hibiscus. Yet, my wish – my plan – to work in this new way in a totally different location was delightful. My action plan for this task worked, until it didn't. Ultimately I moved back in to the kitchen table because the breezes just didn't cooperate in

allowing me to keep the myriad reference books propped open as I needed them to be while I worked. So, my action plan for today's sermon ended up not being what I had envisioned in the moment. Life happens, right? Yes, indeed.

Today's Gospel lesson from Luke gives us some insights into how Jesus thinks we should create the action plan for how we will live life each day as his followers. This text is a challenging one as it begins by calling into question the place of material well-being in our lives. It also seems to make a direct link between God's kingdom – what we think of as heaven – and our willingness to forego personal possessions. “Sell your possessions and give alms ... make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven where no thief comes near and no moth destroys.” Well, *that* sounds impossible, doesn't it. Is Jesus really saying that I should forego all material well-being now so that I can find a reward in heaven at the end of my life? There is certainly an element of Christian thought that would answer that question with a definitive “YES!” Well, maybe not the material well-being stuff so much as a major emphasis on our true reward coming in the eternal life after death made possible by Jesus. This all too familiar view is an apocalyptic one meaning its emphasis is on the end of life as well as the end times for all humanity. Yikes! Not exactly uplifting or empowering, is it? So we are left to ponder

how we are to reconcile what this text seems to say with our own individual lives.

First of all, we need to understand that, contrary to what a certain strand of Christian thought emphasizes, Jesus' teachings – his messages to the disciples and the crowds which followed him – were not apocalyptic. His emphasis was not primarily on life after death as the time when all problems were solved in an other-worldly heaven. Rather, his approach came from the Jewish wisdom tradition which emphasized the continual inbreaking of God's kingdom into life here and now. Jesus taught and believed that the kingdom of God is in the present, in our lives lived each day. He taught definitively that it is the on-going responsibility of – his followers -- God's people to make it so.

We need to pause here to acknowledge that this is one of the things which got Jesus into trouble with the wealthy Temple elite of his day, people who believed that their rigid adherence to Temple ritual and their use of their wealth to purchase and offer flawless sacrifices and to meet the prescribed level of giving to the Temple were all that was needed to assure God's favor. They therefore came to believe their superior position in society and in the Temple allowed them to treat the less fortunate with disdain, even cruelty. They could sit in judgment on the poor and the ill, the strangers and the sojourners, claiming that their misfortune was their own fault. Sound familiar?

In truth, what Jesus is talking about in this text is not that personal possessions are bad in and of themselves. What he is saying is that making the acquisition of personal possessions and wealth the focal point of your life is contrary to God's desire for you. Not because material well-being itself is bad but because the sense of security and personal well-being which people are seeking through the acquisition of money and stuff is a false one. Jesus is not railing against wealth in this text. Instead he is pointing out the corrupting influence that is part and parcel of the relentless pursuit of personal wealth and financial security. This is what he means when he says, "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Where you put your emphasis in the way you live your life each day IS what fills your heart. As the text continues, Jesus is also reminding us that any security we think we can create for ourselves through the acquisition of money and stuff is a false security. Simply put, money and stuff can and does disappear without warning so that if the acquisition of those things is what has defined your life, you will be in big trouble when the winds of fortune shift dramatically.

In other words, Jesus is teaching us here that the only real, permanent security is a life grounded in God. No matter what our circumstance – poor, well-off or somewhere in between – we are always desiring more than what we have. The poor of course long to set aside their anxieties over the basic necessities of food,

shelter, clothing and health care. This is only reasonable and as it should be. The well-off, on the other hand, are still dogged by the desire for more than they already have – sometimes so much so that they no longer see the needs of those less fortunate as of any real importance. All that matters is themselves and what they want. And the folks in the middle? Well, they want more too, if only to increase the distance between themselves and what they see as the reality of the poor. They genuinely come to fear what they see as the potential contagion of poverty.

So, if Jesus is saying here – and he is, quite clearly – that the pursuit of personal well-being and security is not what should form the foundation of the action plan we create for our lives, then what should? What is he talking about when he advises in this text to be “dressed for action and have your lamps lit?” This is an example of how Jesus understands the kingdom of God to be in the here and now, and not just in some far off heaven removed from the problems and realities of the world. Jesus also uses the example of the slave and master to illustrate his point. In Jesus’ time this relationship would have been an easy one for the people to understand. They would have known that the slave was expected to be ready for the master to have need of him/her at any moment and they therefore needed always to be ready to serve because the master would expect them to be, no excuses, no second chances. This is how you need to live your life each day,

Jesus is telling the people. You need to be ready to be of service to God, whenever the opportunity presents itself. You don't know when those opportunities might happen. You can't predict them. You can't know who it is that might need your help. But, you need to be ready to help, to serve, always. Your action plan as one who follows Jesus must mean that you are always ready, willing and able to see what God needs you to do and be ready, willing and able to do it. And if your focus, if your energies, are devoted to yourself and your own selfish desires you will never be ready to respond to the world as God needs you to. Your personal action plan as a follower of Jesus, then, needs to be outwardly focused on being Jesus' living presence in the world, engaging with those around you who are struggling.

No easy task, to be sure. But worth the effort for more reasons than what we might see on the surface. Yes, setting aside our own selfish desires in order to be of service to God by serving other people is vitally important to the coming of the Kingdom on earth. But, there is also a compelling reason beyond this basic Christian teaching and it is particularly pertinent to these days in which we live. As we all know too well, our country is racked with division to the extent that violence, both physical and rhetorical, is far too commonplace making anxiety a dominant factor in our daily lives. This text is one which offers us an antidote to the anxiety which dogs our everyday lives. Here Jesus is inviting us to

loosen our grasp on those factors in life we CAN control as well as those we can't. We do this by working at making the focus of our lives – our daily action plan – to be outside of ourselves completely. Our focus is to be entirely on the other – each person we encounter each day – our spouse, our friend, our child, our parent or sibling, even the complete stranger – AND how God would have us respond to each of them in the moment. In other words, what is God asking of us in the moment, every moment of every day? If this becomes our focus, rather than the relentless pursuit of personal security through the accumulation of personal wealth OR the perceived accumulation of points for a heavenly reward, then and only then will we be living as followers of Jesus, as the people devoted to the living, loving God. It can be argued, then, that what Jesus is truly offering us is a new and unique kind of freedom – freedom from anxiety about personal security and freedom from the rampant social pressures of unrestrained materialism. This in turn leads to a whole new kind of freedom manifested in a boundless spirit of generosity, kindness and love which is God's vision for all of God's beloved people. We become free to be the people of God all the time.

One of the scholars I read as I worked on this sermon offered some deeply meaningful insights to unpacking the simple lesson Jesus was trying to teach in this text. One is that we need always to remember that “things possess us unless we are possessed by

God.” Things possess us *unless* we are possessed by God. So, it’s okay to enjoy having nice things. It’s okay to save for retirement and vacations. It’s okay to improve the house and even spend your hard-earned money on frivolous things now and then. But it’s never okay to be owned, body and soul, by any of those things. We must always be sure we are possessed by God first. As the scholar observed, “we must be faithful in little things because there are no little things to God.” There are no little things to God. What a challenging and comforting thought!

So, dear friends, as you head back out into your lives this morning, I invite you to consider carefully what is your action plan for your life as a follower of Jesus. In those ponderings I hope you will remember that for each of us what we say and do – every little thing – always has consequences. The best laid plans are the ones that are flexible enough to leave room for God to reveal a new plan, a new way forward, a new way in which God needs you to be God’s hand and feet, God’s voice in the world. With God, all things are possible even though they might not be what we plan or expect. But it’s okay because God is in the middle of our lives always, if only we are willing to make room for God to be there. Is there room in yours for God’s plan for you? Only you can answer that? Something to think about... Amen.