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Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, January 31, 2016

Grace Episcopal Church, Hopkinsville, KY

Year C/ Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71:1-6; I Corinthians 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-30

“Kill the Messenger?”

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, Breath of Life. Amen

Several years ago, when I read Raimon Panikkar’s book The Experience of God, the opening words of an early chapter grabbed my attention immediately, and I have read them many times since then. I need to read them every day. Please listen carefully—“Often the immediate character of what is *urgent* distracts our attention from what is *important*. Fundamentally, it is a question of the tension between practice and theory. If the urgent is not important, we throw ourselves into a counter-productive practice; in that case, the “urgent” can wait and is not worth the trouble. If the important is not urgent, we sink into an erroneous theory; the important then becomes nothing but a simple abstraction. I would define prudence as the harmonious union of the urgent (a function of time) and the important (a function of weight). The art of knowing how to combine the urgent and the important is a characteristic of wisdom, one of the conditions for living well” (23).

Most of us live our lives in response to the urgencies—not always urgent in the sense of being matters of life and death—but urgent in the sense of being immediate—all those things that come at us and seem to require our attention—urging us to attend to them. There are more and more of those things in all of our lives—particularly in the technology arena. We can be constantly distracted by text messages and Facebook messages and floods of email advertising and promotions that attempt to grab our attention—and sometimes about very worthwhile

concerns—but none the less disrupting our focus. Maybe we shouldn't pass up that opportunity to sign an online petition having to do with supporting a cause that we are passionate about, but we know at the same time that signing one petition will mean that we will receive even more requests concerning the cause, plus a dozen related causes. It's easy to feel overwhelmed with the barrage—and hard to pull away from it—even when we're doing something extraordinarily important, like driving a car safely.

In the process of attending to all these things that call out for our attention, we easily lose sight of our priorities. We commit over and over to practice a daily prayer discipline—to know a deeper level of relationship with God—but quickly the day is over and we are just too tired. Maybe tomorrow. In ten days, Ash Wednesday will come around again. Will 2016 be the year that we do what we set out to do? Will 2016 be the year when—especially during the Lenten season—we practice doing what is important instead of letting our lives be consumed with relatively minor urgencies?

Twenty-five years ago, Billy Crystal's movie City Slickers hit the screen. It quickly became sermon material—the story of three male friends—New Yorkers—who are facing what we call a “mid-life” crisis—burned out by the speed and complexities of their lives. They take off on a trip to “find themselves” by leaving everything behind and joining in a cattle drive in the Southwest. They meet interesting and memorable people—to say the least--and they have interesting and memorable experiences. But the person who steals the show is the tough and wise old trail boss—Curly (Jack Palance)—whose sage advice to them is to focus on the “one thing” that is most important to them. They want an answer from Curly—what is that one thing?—but he cleverly makes no response. They have been distracted for years—maybe all their lives

—with the urgencies—but now they have at least heard a different message—they have at least been driven out of denial and given the opportunity to choose a different path—to discern for themselves what is important and make a commitment to that.

Jesus is one who got it right when it came to distinguishing the important as having priority over the urgent.

Today's gospel reading from Luke is a continuation of last week's reading—and I wish they had both been included for the same Sunday. Some of you may remember the reading and others haven't had the chance to look at the two pieces together. In the first part of the story, as a dramatic starting point to his public ministry, Jesus goes back home to Nazareth and makes a visit to the synagogue. As many of the educated who are there that day, Jesus stands up to read from the Hebrew scriptures. He reads from the prophet Isaiah—"The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And then he continues with his own personal and memorable words—"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." He's claiming his identity, "This is who I am. This is my vocation. This is the one thing that for me is important." Unlike Jeremiah in our Old Testament lesson, Jesus has no hesitation or excuse. And all those who are listening are so impressed by his words and so thrilled that he speaks with such authority.

Their good opinion and good feelings don't last long. Jesus starts laying out the implications of who he is. All is well when they think that Jesus' good news is about them—that what he's saying is about who they are--the Jewish leaders and supporters. But, all that changes

when Jesus starts reminding them of stories from Hebrew scripture in which the good news is proclaimed to outsiders as well—to Gentiles—the widow at Zarephath whose family is fed during a time of famine through Elijah’s intervention—Naaman the Syrian who has leprosy and is cured through the intervention of Elisha. The crowd is immediately irate—ready to hurl him off the cliff. But, Luke says, “He passed through the midst of them, and went on his way”—apparently undisturbed.

This story turns out to be a microcosm for Jesus’ entire ministry as Luke tells it. He enters a certain locale—he teaches and then acts—he teaches through his actions the good news that he is proclaiming. The religious establishment goes up in arms—and Jesus goes “on his way,” never losing sight of the “one thing”—never losing sight of the Jerusalem that is in his future.

We are a lot like those people in the synagogue that day. We think that the gospel is about us. We love the good news as long as it’s good news about us. When we realize that there’s a cost involved—maybe a financial cost, but also an emotional cost—a stretching or letting go of boundaries sort cost—then we’re not so happy with the gospel message. And we don’t like the bearer of that message. We may want to hurl him or her off a cliff. We call it “killing the messenger.” And we certainly don’t want to follow Jesus and become bearers of that message—we’re afraid of offending someone—or losing our friends, or even families. It can be a costly gospel.

It takes a conversion to the kind of love that Paul is talking about in his letter to the Corinthians to even begin to be faithful to that costly gospel. Because we’ve used this passage so often at weddings, sometimes we think that Paul is writing about romantic love. And there is

something to be said about how these qualities of kindness and patience and humility and hope and steadfastness can go a long way in sustaining a long-term personal union between individuals.

But, that's not what Paul is talking about. This is no wedding sermon at Cana. His message is addressed to a group of people who are not doing well with each other. The members of the church at Corinth are fighting with each other over various issues, and Paul is saying to them that what they are doing has to stop. He tells them that they are all members of one body—the body of Christ—and he goes to great lengths to describe to them the change of heart that they must accomplish in order to be who they really are. They must experience “metanoia”—they must “turn around” and go another way in their relationship with each other. They must do the hard work of loving.

If we are to keep our focus on the mission to which Jesus calls us, we, too, must do the hard work of loving. Paul's letter to the Corinthians applies to Grace Church as well. If we are to continue to move forward in becoming and being the body of Christ in this place, we, too, must continue to grow in love—in adopting and nurturing all those descriptors that Paul uses. “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.”

Growing into the spiritual maturity that Paul describes as “the full stature of Christ” (Eph. 4:15) is what we are called to do. That is what is important. That is the one thing. We cannot be followers of Jesus without doing that hard work. Amen.

