

12 after Pentecost

Luke 12:49-56

August 19, 2007

Prayer: Spirit of the Living God, move through us and among us this day, open our eyes and our ears to see and hear your word of truth for our lives. Amen

Some of you may know that I work at the General Council Office of the United Church of Canada which is just down the road at Islington and Bloor. I have been working there since January 2006 coordinating programs for candidates for ministry.

If you will bear with me for a few moments I want to tell you how this came to be. During the fall of 2005, I was into my 6th year serving a pastoral charge just north of Belleville where Lloyd and I lived. Lloyd was happily serving the Warkworth congregation and we were content to be where we were for the next while.

One Monday morning I was having a computer conversation on MSN with a clergy friend of mine who lived in Toronto. During our conversation I received an email from another colleague informing me that the person responsible for programs for candidates at the GCO was leaving.

My clergy friend on MSN immediately said that I would be perfect for that job and that I should apply. I politely thanked her for her opinion and said that I had not been thinking about leaving Belleville and I didn't really want to live or work in Toronto. (Typical response from someone who lives away from Toronto!)

This incident was the beginning of a time of intentional discernment for me, and for Lloyd and I.

I pretty much ignored the possibility of applying for the job and moving, but something kept niggling away at me. I received several phone calls and emails from other friends and colleagues who encouraged me and in fact prodded me to consider this opportunity.

Lloyd and I considered what it would mean for our lives.

Was I really being called to respond?

Was this really what God had in mind for us?

How were we to interpret these events and the voices speaking to us?

After much thought and prayer and conversation, I came to know that God was indeed calling me to something new and that it was my responsibility to respond.

I certainly don't know what the future holds, but I do know deep within my heart that I am where I am supposed to be and doing what God has gifted me to do.

In the gospel passage I read we heard Jesus say:

“You hypocrites, you know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?”

This scripture is not the usual Sunday fare -in fact, it's a little too hard to take for a quiet summer Sunday morning.

There is no gentle Jesus, meek and mild, no easy yokes or light burdens,  
no kind words about love and forgiveness.

This is the other side of the Gospel, the other side of faith;  
the side that we don't embrace quite so willingly.

But there it is and it is very much a part of the whole Christian message.

It's challenging to hear from Jesus that we don't get it - that we are busying ourselves with things that can't be changed or that don't matter.

But we do need to hear it. We simply can't ignore or overlook the reality that God offers us a vision of what human life can be, and what it should be. God wants us to use our gifts, to live faithfully, fully and abundantly with God at the center of our lives.

It's all too easy to ignore the bigger picture and just concentrate on our day to day living and working. We become complacent and insulated from what is going on in the world.

It's no wonder we have difficulty interpreting the present times?

It's interesting to me that Jesus talks about our ability to interpret the 'appearance of earth and sky'. Yes, we've pretty well got the earth and sky predictions covered.

We have the Weather Channel! We've got a whole TV channel devoted to interpreting the appearance of the earth and sky! And we've got satellites littering outer space keeping a watch on weather patterns to help us with our predictions.

In the aftermath of the tsunami and Hurricane Katrina, we are putting more and more technology in place to help us predict the earth and the sky so we can evacuate people ahead of time and diminish the loss of life.

Recently, interpretation of the earth and sky has become a hot topic. Scientists are seeing some disturbing trends. Al Gore calls it "An Inconvenient Truth".

Global warming is a reality - the appearance of the earth and sky is changing. We ignore it at our own peril. All of human kind is called to respond, to re-examine our actions as stewards of this planet.

In many ways, it's easier for us to respond to the truth of global warming even if it is

inconvenient. There are things that each person can do that will make a difference. When it comes to making sense of what is happening in our lives we have more difficulty. There is no technology that can help us - only God. God is ready to guide us, to work with us so we know what it is we must do to respond?

Jesus was very clear about how he was to respond. We know the story of his baptism and God's claim that he is the Beloved Son of God. And in his wilderness time, Jesus surrenders his power and indeed his whole life to God's purpose for him.

In Nazareth, Jesus publically accepts his vocation, his calling to do God's will, however it may unfold. The words of Isaiah are fulfilled in our hearing.

"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."

God has called and equipped Jesus to repair the world, to reorder disordered relationships, to overcome the disparities that exist between men and women and create injustice. He is to complete God's work of reconciliation of binding up and making whole.

And this is Good News because it is a message of compassion and healing, but it is also provocative because it calls people to change. It calls us to reorder our lives, to look at the directions in which we are going. It calls us to a new sense of awareness.

One Christian writer once observed that "unawareness is the root of all evil". The gentle unconsciousness that creates the greatest evils in the world. So part of Jesus' mission is to call people to awareness. Be aware! See that you have choices to make!

Jesus saw many of the religious patterns of his day as a means of protection against the deeper demands of God, as a way of insulating one's self against God's desire to reorder all things in justice and peace.

And so as we hear Jesus' words as a call to us, I think we have to look at our own patterns of unawareness.

Where are our hearts closed?

Where are we using religion to fend off, in a way, the deeper demands of God?

Where are we being called to lose ourselves in order to find ourselves?

How are we being called to a transformation of our consciousness, a way of seeing the world, our responses to the world and those around us?

Churches can be amazingly self-serving and unaware.

We can become caught up in the minutiae and structures of our own religious traditions and lose sight of our deeper calling to be part of God's mission - to allow ourselves to be transformed into the people God created us to be.

In her book "Practicing Resurrection", Nora Gallagher says: "When it comes right down to it, it seems to me that Jesus invites us to follow where truth leads, and to bear the cost of whatever truth we find".

Jesus was very clear about God's call, he knew his mission, and he bore the cost of his response.

We may have to work harder, listen more intently, know ourselves and our gifts better in order to interpret the events of the present times but it is essential if we are to participate in God's vision. We must strive to know what God has in mind for us; how we are to participate in the coming of God's kingdom!

The core of my work at the GCO is about discernment. It is about putting into place processes that create opportunities for people to discern together how they will respond to God's call. Most often this is focused on those who believe they are called to paid accountable ministry in the UCC. But we are all called, we all have a ministry to live out.

Embedded in our call to be Christians is a responsibility to discover God's purpose for our life and be the person God has created us to be.

Kathleen Callahan, in her book "Projects That Matter" defines discernment as - a faithful inquiry into what God is doing in the world and how we are to respond.

As Christians we are called to uncover our gifts and the purpose for our lives - to be aware of where and through whom God is guiding our lives.

And once we discern a path, interpret the present times, if you will, we are called to trust that God is with us and that we will be able to respond faithfully.

As Jesus invites us into the truth, challenges us to be aware of the events of our lives he also invites us to allow him to work within us through the Holy Spirit so that together we can bring God's kingdom that much closer.

May God grant us the grace to see and hear and know what it is he would have us do with our lives.

Amen