A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

“*A Sacred Fire*”

Luke 12:49-56

August 18, 2019

Good morning, dear friends. I am very glad to be with you this morning, to catch up with many of you this week and over breakfast this morning, and to meet new friends, some of you visiting with us, some of you moving to Waco, wondering what you’re getting into. You’re getting into something really good, though you won’t be able to appreciate it until your face stops melting off in a month or so when summer starts to release its grip. Hang in there and welcome. I got out of the heat this summer. It was my sabbatical, and I traveled quite a bit this summer, so this is my first Sunday in the pulpit since early June. I’m glad to be here and to be here with you.

I confess Luke 12 isn’t exactly the gospel text I would have picked for my first Sunday back were it not the lectionary reading. It’s shocking, startling, disturbing, and more than a little confounding. “Do you think I came to bring peace on earth?” Jesus asks. Well, is that a trick question? Isn’t the answer yes? That’s what the angels said when you were born. “Peace on earth, goodwill to men.” Isn’t that what you said after the resurrection, “Peace be with you.” So, yes? But he says No. And that’s . . . confusing to say the least.

Jesus is trying to get everyone to understand what they cannot seem to get. He has not come to declare God’s peace on their sleepwalking lives but to call them and lead them on the path to true peace. Boredom is not a substitute for peace; neither is walking around in a stupor, nor numb to the pain of the world around you. Peace is not measured by how little you are troubled by other’s problems. Peace isn’t a truce between enemies; nor a wall to keep others out of your life. Peace isn’t manufactured or made from any of the ways we engineer our lives to bring comfort. If that’s what peace is, Jesus says, I’ve not come to bring any of that. But I have come to bring you something you’ve only dreamed possible: peace with yourself, others, and your God—that goes through me. If you’ve ever felt like there was more to life than you’re living, follow me. I’m going to lead you to what can be; what should be; what will be. Wake from your slumber and follow me. The road will be hard. The way will be costly. But it will be good.” Now that’s not an easy gospel. But it’s good news. But it’s only good news for those dissatisfied with the wafer-thin quality of life they have. Even the hard words are good news. The good news is that there’s actually something more, something better, richer, fuller, more meaningful, and may cost you everything. You know it’s worth it.

This summer one of the highlights of a long, long road trip to Maine was a day at a beautiful, tree lined lake near Concord, MA. One of my guides this summer was Henry David Thoreau who was so frustrated by the obsessive consumerism of his community he famously left ‘civilization’ in the 1840s to live in the woods by Walden Pond, to live as an individual, rugged, alone, simple.

The dream is compelling. He famously declares: “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear . . .I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms...” Let’s be real. I wasn’t quite that ambitious. I didn’t want to build my own hut to live in, rely on my gardening and fishing skills to eat, or bathe in frigid lake water. At Walden Pond and elsewhere, I just wanted to go to the woods so I wouldn’t come to the end of my summer and say that I had not truly *sabbaticalled*. But it’s a start.

Thoreau isn’t a perfect guide in lots of ways: as a nature philosopher, nor a Christian, nor even a woods dweller. His famous account of life at Walden represents only 2-3 years of his life and they say that while he was out there ‘living off the land’ his mother still did his laundry. So, we might like to introduce him to the Christian Desert Fathers who truly uprooted their lives to live in the world’s most uninhabitable places and there wrestled with God. Then again, respect where it’s due, how many of us have built our own hut, fished and gardened for everything we ate, and listened still, quiet for hours to the sounds of nature’s chorus. How many of us have stepped out of the consumerist hamster wheel of quiet desperation? Thoreau gives us something important, indeed more than I expected.

I thought reading Thoreau and going to Walden Pond would be about nature, finding God in the solace of solitude and simplicity in nature. That was a primary purpose this summer: seeking solitude in God’s creation, reflecting on our spirituality and the ethical challenges posed today by neglect of our relationship with creation. I figured Thoreau would guide me in those directions and in this he is a faithful guide to many people around the world. You can imagine my surprise and delight later in the summer, when in Assisi, Italy, in the realm of St. Francis, in a remote little restored church to which I hiked one day, on a bookshelf was an Italian translation of *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau.

So, I expected Thoreau would point in this direction: of nature and contemplation, solitude, silence, stillness, participation in nature as a creature, and he did. The actual Walden Pond is really beautiful. If you’re gonna go live in the wilderness, pick somewhere pretty, I guess. I don’t want to live in a hut, but I could spend a long time there beside the lake shore. What I didn’t expect but should have was what awakened in him out there in the wilderness was not escape from the world, but new clarity about it. Silence, prayer, simplicity . . .the fruit of contemplation is not ascent out of the world, but it is fuller, clearer, more wholehearted, spiritually alive transformation of it.

Sometimes people worry prayer and contemplation take us away from the world and cause us to neglect the witness and work of love of neighbor. People worry about this division they feel between inner work and outer work, between prayer and witness, between contemplation and action, between spirituality and ministry. But what has been discovered over and over again is that inner work enlivens our outer work; prayer gives strength to witness; contemplation sustains action; spirituality is incarnated in ministry. Moses met God in the wilderness at a burning bush; Jesus often retreated to the wilderness to pray and then return with urgency to preach the Kingdom of God; St. Francis’s life was so integrated with nature his prayers joined all creation’s praise of God as he preached the gospel. The quiet, rugged simplicity at Walden sharpened Thoreau’s clarity about the human condition.

Even if all of us who aren’t going to go live in the woods in a hut: we need a little silence; we need solitude. We need space cracked open in our lives to rediscover true life, true living in the face of all the weak substitutes. We need sabbath.

It changed Thoreau and through him changed the world. In silence, away from the noise, he was able to hear the cries of the suffering of the poor. In stillness, away from the din of marketplaces and distractions, he was able to see the racism that consumed even self-satisfied northern states. In solitude, away from small-talk and banal conversations, he learned to speak truthfully. In simplicity, away from the ways his life was absorbed into consumerist obsessions, he came to understand how much of our lives are wasted pursuing the empty dreams.

Prayer is not a retreat away from the world, it is a cauldron of clarity that often births holy dissatisfaction with the way you’re living. You know there’s more. You want something more. And you’re not satisfied anymore until you lay hold of it.

I went to the woods to renew my participation with the natural world, to love and worship God through the wonder of the non-human parts of God’s creation: trees, ponds, hills, shores. When our relationship with nature is renewed, our kinship with humans is renewed as well. We may go to the woods to retreat into nature, but there, God restores our lives and our loves and shows us the path to peace isn’t retreat from the world but in seeking the shalom, the goodness, the wholeness of the place you’re living and people with whom you live.

The 20th century’s revolutionary biologist, Rachel Carson understood this relationship and took it even farther. When we renew our wonder in creation we learn to live again. This accomplished scientist wrote like a poet, like a prophet: “A child’s world is fresh and new and beautiful, full of wonder and excitement. It is our misfortune that for most of us that clear-eyed vision, that true instinct for what is beautiful and awe-inspiring, is dimmed and even lost before we reach adulthood. If I had influence with the good fairy who is supposed to preside over the christening of all children, I should ask that her gift to each child in the world be a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life, as an unfailing antidote against the **boredom and disenchantment of later** years, the **sterile preoccupation with things that are artificial, the alienation from the sources of our strength**.” (Sense of Wonder)

In the middle of the 20th century, she names what Thoreau saw in the 19th century, and what is true for so many people in the 21st century:

*Boredom and disenchantment*

*Sterile preoccupation with things that are artificial*

*Alienation from the sources of our strength.*

Are these not the symptoms of the disease of our times?

A thread begins to take shape through time, thin in some places, thick as a rope in others, a thread of wisdom from the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah through the Desert Fathers, through St. Francis, Thoreau, Rachel Carson, and countless, countless others. A rope of wisdom anchored in Jesus Christ: wake up, rise from your slumber, pay whatever the cost is, life is not a dress rehearsal; treadmills don’t go anywhere. Love beauty, live wholeheartedly, know you are beloved, and know that you are called. When you sense more demanded of you, something more within you, listen to that voice.

Sixty years after Thoreau’s writings about nature and finding peace in doing the right thing even when it’s costly, across the world in India, a lawyer named Mahatma Ghandi discovers Thoreau and is inspired to non-violent civil disobedience against British oppressive rule. The story doesn’t stop there. In the 1960’s, the Baptist pastor Martin Luther King reads Jesus’s guidance to love enemies and learns from Ghandi and Thoreau just how costly that can be. King leads a revolution for civil rights here for all Americans.

When we’re tuned into the kingdom way of Jesus, there is no comfortable peace with the way the world is. We are not be at peace with the way we are disordered. Do you feel it? This holy hunger; righteous thirst, holy dissatisfaction leads not to despair, thanks be to God, but in Jesus, leads to new life. In Jesus, through death and resurrection, baptism and renewal, it leads to new life. You hunger and thirst for more, for truth, for love, for faith, for life. All of this is worth risking everything for.

It is a gift, a true gift to have any clarity whatsoever of the difference between platitudes and truth, between the thin veneer of weary comfort and true peace. If we look to Jesus for platitudes that tell us the way we’re going is just fine, we instead meet a Jesus who is stressed, urgent, and doing everything he can to shake us from our soul’s slumber. Wake up. Rise up. It’s like everyone is sleepwalking toward a cliff and wants Jesus to just tell them everything gonna be ok.

Meanwhile, listen to the urgency in his voice. “I am distressed,” he says. Jesus is trying to get everyone to understand the core of his being, the same spirit of Jeremiah, Amos, Isaiah: I cannot gloss the world as it is with holy words like peace, love, faith, hope.

Like Jeremiah, I will not say ‘peace, peace’ when there is no peace.

Like Amos, I will not call something love, when it is unjust.

Like Isaiah, I will not call something faith, if it will not take up its cross and follow.

Like John of Patmos, I will not call it hope, if it cannot see beyond its personal satisfaction.

That’s what he means by “I did not come to bring peace.” He didn’t come to baptize the way we already are; he came to lead us to a new way of being. What was it someone said, “God loves you just as you are, and loves you too much to let you stay that way.” The real is too good. The peace God actually offers is hard won. The love God offers is sacrificial, sometimes to death. The faith God offers will change your life. The hope God offers will see you through the fires of hell.

For all its sparkly things, so much of modern life is perfectly designed to produce people who are bored and disenchanted, preoccupied with things that are artificial, and alienated from the sources of our strength: family, friendships, real food, silence, solitude, prayer, dignity, love of neighbor, and love of God.

I think what Jesus is getting at here, distressed, urgently cleaving from all that is keeping us from taking hold of what is real; whatever the cost, he will not call good what is not good. He would rather die that let us go on living another day going on the way we’re going.

I mentioned MLK earlier, who read Ghandi, Thoreau, and of course Jesus. MLK is a complex person, but definitely an icon of the best intentions of our nation’s ideals. He represents a challenge to all that we say but do not live out.

So, when we as a nation declare all are created equal, but legalize and condone slavery and segregation, King has not only a dream but a calling to be disturbed.

When we say justice for all, but for decades mobs lynch the defenseless and powerless in anger and amusement, King not only has a dream, but a calling to repent.

When we lift high a torch at the harbor and say, give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore, King reminds us even our poetic ideals don’t go far enough for Christians: no one in the world is wretched refuse. All people are God’s children.

In our nation’s capital this summer, we visited a memorial to MLK which stands imposing, sober at the edge of the Tidal Basin. Larger than life, much larger than life, the Preacher King, standing alone chiseled from a mountain of granite stands in his preacher suit, arms crossed clutching a manuscript, staring out across the water. Perhaps this is his pond-side retreat now, set beside the gently lapping waters. Perhaps this is finally his peace, his place of rest. But he does not rest yet. Look out across the pond with him. Follow the site lines of his penetrating vision, challenging all to live, to truly live to come alive to their convictions to live without the hypocrisy in the claims they make, to live in kinship with one another, to sacrifice for the good of others. Follow the sight of his eyes under his furrowed brow; he’s looking straight across the water at the statue of Thomas Jefferson who gave us the Declaration of Independence but couldn’t quit the legacy of slavery. Two men, bound together now forever, their dreams for a nation’s people to live with dignity, to start a revolution for it and then another one, to give their lives for the good of others. While Jefferson gazes out toward the power center of an empire he could have hardly imagined, King stares at Jefferson as if to echo the words of Jesus to all of us, “I came to cast fire on the earth. The fire is already kindled in me. How about you?”

This is Jesus startling question to all of us, starling but welcome. May sacred fire burn brightly within us. May we be renewed for fullness of life with one another and all God’s creatures in the kingdom of the true Prince of Peace.

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