

TENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

August 1, 2010

Hosea 6:4-6; Luke 12:13-21

What Is Real

This sermon begins with a caveat. Much of what I say will go right over the heads of anyone here who does not own a cell phone or a computer. You don't have to listen because the core message is that we all should be giving, caring and loving. Amen.

In today's passage from Luke, a man who creates storage so that he can hoard all his wealth dies before he can use any of it. We live in a different world; a world that is ruled by the whims and fortunes of technology. Fourteen years ago, Neil and I took a once in a lifetime trip to Italy. While we were in Florence, I called home from a public phone, using my ATT phone card. It was such an easy way to stay connected to our family. All we needed to do was find a public phone, push some keys and have a conversation across 3,000 miles. On that call, my son let me know that a Mary Ellen Spencer from First Congregational Church in Burlington had called and would I please call her back. I used that amazing little ATT card again, called Mary Ellen and said that I would enjoy meeting the Search Committee. Could they wait until we came back from Italy? Obviously they did wait.

While we were in Italy, we saw something strange and unusual. People sitting in restaurants or walking on sidewalks were all talking to themselves. It was rather disconcerting until we looked closer and discovered that they were all using cell phones; a phenomenon yet to take general hold at home. In 2010, and on my third, I think, Cell Phone, I call my sister in Arizona, my husband somewhere on Route 89, or my daughter in New York. I have progressed from the bare basic phone to one that I can use to send pictures to my family, all of whom have cell phones and some actually receive the pictures. As always, my children are way ahead of me. They have I phones or blackberrys and one has an I Pad. And I freely admit that I find myself thinking how I could really use one of those new phones that provide visual as well as audio communication. Shades of Dick Tracy! With one of those, I would be able to see my grandson in real time. Of course, my daughter would also need one. Insidious, isn't it. How long before all these end up stored in the dark corners of our drawers as the next generation of technology comes bursting forth?

I am not against technology by any means. In fact, the changes that have improved our lives are astounding. From nano-technology in medicine to ever more powerful computers, to the utilizing of wind and solar energy to heat our homes, we are using our God-given creative powers to choose to make live better for ourselves, our children and their children. But I also remember that there was a serpent in the Garden of Eden.

The Gospel passage begins with a young man complaining to Jesus that he was not getting his fair share of an inheritance. Wisely, Jesus would not step into that family dispute. In fact, instead of sympathy for his situation, the young man was told to guard

against the trap of greed. I do feel sorry for that man. He may have had a legitimate complaint. Maybe he was being denied goods and money that should have been fairly apportioned. Hoping for sympathy, he turned to Jesus. Jesus did not respond in words of righteous justice on his behalf; rather, he responded with a kind of empathy that served as a spiritual warning. He taught the young man to have a different world view in words that could be translated as: “Although it often seems that way, your life is not measured by what you have or what you own. Your life is measured in who you are at your core being. If, at your core, you are a giving and caring person, that will show forth no matter how much you have in the bank, what you own or where you live.”

The commercials that invite us to be a part of the new wave of technology certainly insinuate the antithesis of Jesus’ message to the young man. “Get them all. You need them,” those commercials tell us. “Get a Mac. Get a PC. Get a Netbook. Make sure that you can view movies; find directions, play games. Listen to music. Text. Get all that you need to stay connected and be entertained.” What they don’t say is that with all the amazing equipment that fits in the palm of your hand, you can build barriers constructed from all of the amazing communication tools in your hands. It becomes increasingly easy for us to use these instruments of communication to control our human interaction, not only by drawing near, but also through distancing ourselves from family, friends and colleagues.

Technology is great and I am in awe of what we have. Like many of you, I spent my early years with a dip pen and ink well; a rotary telephone, and a test pattern on the black and white TV. Today I can no longer conceive of going through each day without my cell phone or my computer. But, those tools do not define me any more than my

soon to be installed titanium knee. And yet, it seems that I need to constantly remind myself that all the communications tools which I now enjoy have to be used wisely because they both enhance and simultaneously block communication.

This does not sound like an exposition on Luke's scripture passage but what I want to describe, complex and somewhat inconsistent, I admit, still relates to what we heard. As we more easily communicate through cell phones and e-mail, Facebook, twitter, we give less of ourselves in those communications. We are in danger of practicing a type of greed, a kind of hoarding. As we grow more dependent on these tools, we become increasingly superficial in our gift of ourselves to family and friends. We withhold feelings in the e-mails we write. We withhold deep conversations on our cell phones. And at times, the tools of communication become instruments of hurt or pain. I know of those who have broken off long term relationships via e-mail. I have also been told of folks whose notice of being fired was through e-mail.

Paul Simon wrote a song inspired by a poem of John Donne. Simon's song was written before cell phones or computers. His album was not on a CD. It was an LP, played on a phonograph. The words, however, are as appropriate in 2010 as they were in the mid 1960's.

I have my books
And my poetry to protect me;
I am shielded in my armor,
Hiding in my room, safe within my womb.
I touch no one and no one touches me.
I am a rock,
I am an island.

And a rock feels no pain;
And an island never cries.

We may choose to hide behind the convenience of e-mail, shielded from conversations that might become difficult or painful. We may hide behind technology because there are folks from whom we hoard our friendship, parceling out only a few words. We may hide simply because we are introverts and keeping a distance is more comfortable than conversation. Used well, the miracles of modern communication do provide us with opportunities to be fully present to both the joys and the struggles of those we love but used callously or thoughtlessly, we deny our loved ones the essence of our care. We could find ourselves locking off that care and concern behind barriers of superficiality because – choose one – we don't know what to say. We don't have the time for a real conversation. We'd rather not get involved so we e-mail those few words or write a brisk comment on Facebook.

We do not have to hide behind a computer or a cell phone for any of those, do we? It takes courage to put our hearts on our sleeves and to risk the discomfort of not knowing what to say, or the pain of drawing too close to another's ache. But what are we human for, if not to share and to care. When we use the technology at our fingertips to extend that care, we are simply reaching out in new and exciting ways. But it really doesn't matter what tool we use to respond. It only matters that our response to anyone be with integrity and from the heart. Thus, giving freely of our care, our compassion. our interest in another, is what is important no matter how the interest is expressed: a card, e-mail, a telephone call or a visit. When we do so, we are fully and deeply human as Christ encourages us to be.

That beloved classic children's' book, *The Velveteen Rabbit* written by Margery Williams sums it all up.

“What is real?” asked the rabbit one day. ... “Real isn’t how you are made,” said the Skin Horse. “It’s a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but really loves you, then you become real. “Does it hurt?” asked the rabbit. ”Sometimes,” said the skin horse, for he was always truthful. “When you are real, you don’t mind being hurt.” Does it happen all at once, like being wound up or bit by bit?” “It doesn’t happen all at once,” said the skin hose. “You become. It takes a long time. That’s why it doesn’t often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don’t matter at all, because once you are real you can’t be ugly, except to people who don’t understand.”

With that young man from the Gospel, may we find our reality and share it with all, in all ways.

Amen.