

Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost
July 31, 2016
Marley United Methodist Church, Glen Burnie MD

Hosea 11.1-11
Psalm 107.1-9, 43
Colossians 3.1-11
Luke 12.13-21*

Feeling at Home

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen

Last December I was admitted to the Baltimore Washington Medical Center through the Emergency Room. I had gone there because of some serious chest pains and shortness of breath. My family has a history of heart failure and I have a heart condition, so my fears were not imaginary. The hospital staff was very professional and thorough. After taking care of all the various stuff that needed to be done immediately to keep me alive, they did a heart catheterization. They sedate you for that procedure and although I wasn't asleep I sure wasn't awake or alert either. Somebody said something to me as they were wheeling me out of that room but whatever it was did not register. They took me to my room, put me back in bed and left me. For several hours I laid there, still in some discomfort wondering what they had found and what was happening to me. Finally, come the morning, my personal physician came in and filled me in on what was what and we discussed a change to my medication. I've been fine since. So why am I telling you that story?

Because I know what it is to be a 'possible heart attack' instead of a human being with concerns and anxieties. You see, concern and anxiety at that level aren't usually treated with medication so they did not merit the attention of the medical staff. I was starting to feel desperate for somebody, anybody, to talk to me and tell me what was going on—even if it was the worst possible news I think it would have been better than just lying there with the chest pain unabated and not knowing. I did ring for

the nurse once during that time and asked her what was going on and she said, 'you're not having a heart attack' and walked out. I almost felt I had somehow let her down by not having one so she could go to work on me. You know, pain hurts regardless of what causes it and anxiety is also real and the cure is someone to just take a few minutes to acknowledge that I was a human being with feelings and just be there for a moment, you know, to hold my hand and pat me on the head.

I once read a newspaper story about a doctor, a cancer specialist, who said "Sometimes caring means sitting at the side of a . . . patient for 20 minutes, or so, not talking, not doing anything, just being a presence." He was a doctor who understood that patients are people not a set of symptoms and that just being there, a human connection, is a vital part of our human need. If you are taking notes, that's the 1st thing to write down – a connection, a relationship is a vital part of our human need.

What I'm trying to put a finger on, and this is the second point, is that all of us have a Mr. or Mrs. Fix-It lurking in us. When I was a seminary student doing my Clinical Pastoral Education internship in a local hospital we called it 'the Mr. Goodwrench mentality'. When a situation develops that urge to 'fix it' leaps to the fore and sets to work on the 'problem'. And in the doing, we all too often overlook the people who are involved. The medical staff did an excellent job in protecting my health and preserving my life. They just over-looked a human being named Lonnie who was caught up in it all.

In this morning's gospel lesson the context is entirely different, but the same issue of 'problem' vs. 'people' is under examination. A man in the crowd comes to Jesus and says, "Rabbi, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." I don't know how many of you have ever been involved with a dispute over the dividing up of a deceased parent's estate, but they are never pretty. In our culture, if all else fails, the executor can just sell everything and divide the proceeds equally, and usually the only big winners are the lawyers.

But in Israel at the time of our story that option was not available. You see the family inheritance usually consisted mostly of land, the family farm,

and the Hebrew's sense of connection to their land was something most of us do not understand. My first marriage was into a rural farm family and I gained an awareness of just how strong ties to the land are in an America that is fading into the past. It is the family's legacy--you can't just sell it off and give it to strangers.

And so this father has left a little bit of the holy land to his sons. It is unthinkable to just turn it into cash. And even today, it is very difficult to work out a fair division of a farm. I mean, who gets the half with the creek running through it, or who gets the woodlot, and which one gets the house in which their ancestors had been born and raised?

Now this fellow who approached Jesus may have been entirely justified in his view of how the property should be divided. It might have been his brother that was holding out unreasonably. But, you see, in those days if the heirs couldn't settle a dispute over a will, the first one who got a recognized rabbi to agree with their proposed division of the property won. The other side was legally bound to accept the rabbi's ruling. The down side of this practice was that while it sped up the dispute resolution process, it also allowed the occasional rabbi to line their pockets. Yes, that probably happened, people are people after all.

Now, one reason I suspect that this fellow was not trying to rip off his brother was that if he had been, he was making a very poor choice of rabbi. So it is entirely likely that he had a reasonable claim and that his brother was being obstinate and selfish. Further, I suspect that the fellow who speaks to Jesus is a younger brother – it would explain why the other brother was still in possession of the property – he was the elder.

So, "Rabbi, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." But Jesus doesn't just step in, look over the details and make a ruling does he? And here's the point I want to make. He doesn't have a Mr. Fix-It mentality. He rather regularly sees past the immediate presenting problem and reaches through it to the people involved. (Do you see the theme? See people, not problems)

As we see so many times in the stories of Jesus, when there is an attempt to drag him into a conflict on one side or the other, Jesus not only refuses to be drawn in but he responds in a way that challenges everybody involved to step back and look at the whole thing from another angle so that a way of reconciliation might be found. For Jesus, human relationships are more important than the stuff of disputes. Because if there is one thing certain in this fellow's situation, it is that if ever got a rabbi to resolve the thing there would be no reconciliation with his brother. . (There's point #1 again – value relationships)

It would have been a bit like a family situation I once heard about. It seems a woman and her son each put in \$20 every week to buy lottery tickets. This went on for 10 years and one day one of the tickets held the winning number and was worth \$4.2 million. The son immediately claimed that it was his \$20 that bought that ticket so the winnings were all his. Undaunted, his mother, who said that their relationship had always been "loving and close", sued him for her half.

“Teacher, tell my son to divide the family lottery winnings with me!” Once you bring in the lawyers to resolve a family dispute, you might win the dispute but you'll probably lose the family.

So, to make his point, Jesus tells a story of a rich man who's got all the goodies but no family. A rich man who was making money hand over fist beyond what even he expected. The rich man has eight times the harvest he expects and it won't all fit in the barns so he has to decide what to do about it.

Now the first things most Jews would have done in the circumstances was to give thanks to God for this great blessing and then celebrate with all their friends by throwing a party that might have lasted several days.

And the usual thing to do when making a tough decision like 'what to do with the excess' would have been to walk down to the town gates where the elders of the community spent their time chewing over the problems of the universe and discuss it with them. In those meetings no one was interested in coming to a solution too quickly – after all, there is no point in

messing up a good debate by coming up with an answer. Community discussion was valued for its own sake—it was a social event. And most people with this kind of problem would have gone down there, or at least chewed it over with their own family for a month or two.

But in Jesus' story, the rich man doesn't do any of these things. He thanks no one and when he celebrates he celebrates alone. When he wants advice he talks to himself. That's what it says: "He said to himself 'What shall I do?' And then he answered himself, 'I shall do this: I will pull down my barns and build bigger barns, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.'" And then, still talking to himself, he says; "And I will say to myself 'Self, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink and be merry.'" You can imagine why this guy has no one else to talk to. He's the sort of character who'd sell his grandmother if there was a buck in it, or cheat his mother out of her half of the lottery winnings--the sort that no one wants for a friend. And the kind where you'd better keep your hand on your wallet when he's around.

Jesus prefaced his story by saying that 'your life does not consist in the abundance of your possessions' and now he's set up this picture of a totally pathetic creature who's lived as though life was just a case of "he who dies with the most toys wins." So he's saying to the man with the property division problem, "How much is it worth to win this one? Will your life really be better if you destroy your family to get your hands on the inheritance?" In other words, no Mr. Fix-it for him, rather he invites us to consider what is really important--relationships.

When Jesus said that life doesn't consist in the abundance of possessions, he didn't spell out the alternative. He didn't need to. It was obvious to everyone living in a culture that was still built around extended families and community networks. In our culture the point is much harder for many of us to see—families no longer live in the neighborhood, they are scattered across the country and, in some cases, the world. I have family in 2 widely separated places in Pennsylvania, Glen Burnie, Yorktown, Raleigh and Belgium. With family not close, we are surrounded by others whom we tend to see based on their usefulness— even if it is just how useful they are to us in making us feel good or whatever.

Deep decades long friendships are increasingly rare. Frankly, I realize that I don't have any friendships that more than 10 years old. We live in a disposable culture – whether it is paper plates or people, if they are no longer useful we drop them. Think about the fact that I seldom hear people talking about making friends – that requires work. But we are proud of how many friends we have – as if they were a possession – a mindset that is only furthered by social media, where it is the number of friends or followers one has that counts, not the quality of the relationship.

In Jesus' day to be rich was valued, but to be rich without family or close relationships was seen as a ludicrous waste and a pitiful condition – it brought pity from the rest of the community. Today we'd probably elect that man to political office. He'd certainly be a shoo-in for an available CEO or CFO position. We'd probably have him restructuring our health insurance system, our tax codes and straightening out the water problem in Detroit, or something--maybe even heading up the INS or the IRS or the DNC – they have a vacancy.

We have crippled ourselves with a culture of consumer greed - work, shop, accumulate, die - we are now seeing what goes on when we structure the institutions of our society on the same principles we've been living by. They become as unresponsive, sick, friendless and dysfunctional as the people running them.

An individual's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. Jesus points us back to what our lives do consist of: our inter-relatedness with God, with one another, with our world – that's the third point to write down. Now, there is a wealth you can take with you. Any values or priorities for which you are willing to sacrifice those inter-connections, those relationships, are values and priorities that will cripple you and drain you of spirit and of life itself.

Jesus came to reconnect us with the source of life, with himself and with each other in a life marked with love, with hope, with care, with joy. He reminds us to reach beyond the problems and see the people involved.

There is a fairly recent gospel hymn which really speaks to my heart and I believe captures a sense of what this life can be like.

You couldn't have told me I'd find what I found
Contentment and peace from above
Feeling at home in the presence of Jesus
Laying way back in His love
Warming myself by the fires of His spirit
Camping right close to the throne

Just feeling at home
Feeling at home

Feeling at home in the presence of Jesus
Hearing Him call me His own
Putting my feet right under His table
Knowing I won't be alone
Needed and happy and free
Feeling accepted and loved and forgiven
a part of His warm family.

Just feeling at home
Feeling at home

- If you've been busy trying to fix things for yourself and for others,
- if you've been having a conversation with yourself about how you would like to spend your lottery winnings,
- if you're sick of living like an island
- or some kind of bank that everyone and anyone can claim a piece of
- if you're tired of working like a robot
- and being treated like a ledger entry or a set of symptoms
- then here you'll find the solutions.

The God who is the father of our Lord Jesus Christ reaches past all the 'stuff' in our lives and touches the humans who are involved – you and me – and he uses that touch to turn us toward each other.

Putting your feet right under his table
Knowing you won't be alone
Just feeling at home,
Feeling at home

Amen