

Grace Episcopal Church
13th Sunday after Pentecost
Rev Brian C Justice

Deuteronomy 30.15-20
Psalm 1
Philemon 1-21
Luke 14.25-33

On Loan From The Universe

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O God of Life Abundant,
Unclutch our hands,
Unclutch our hearts,
And let us let go to follow you.
Amen.

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Jesus the Wild Lion roars again!

"Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters ...yes ... and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple ... So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions."

What?

What do we do with a text like this? How are we supposed to do this? I mean really?

Jesus ... the Good but Not Tame Lion ... roars again!

But before we move as swiftly as we can to a metaphorical reading of the text, searching for some semblance meaning that *we* can apply to *our* lives, let us pause

... and remember ... there are some among us who have lived out this text ... and lived it out *literally*.

St Anthony of Egypt, who died in the 4th century, is generally recognized as the founder of Christian monasticism. When, as a young man, he heard the Gospel injunction to “give up all your possessions” he did it! He had inherited the estate of a wealthy landowner but after hearing this, he sold all of his property, gave the money to the poor, and went to live in the desert.¹ And hundreds and hundreds of others – men and women – flocked to him. And thus were born the “Desert Fathers” and the “Desert Mothers” from whom sprang the Christian monastic tradition.

St Bernard of Clairvaux, in the 12th century in France, renounced the prosperity and privilege of his aristocratic family and established the Cistercian Order, a reformed branch of the Benedictines. (BTW, one branch of the Cistercians is the Trappists, to which belonged Thomas Merton, whose writings many of you know.)

In the early 13th century, St Francis of Assisi in Italy was the heir to a prosperous silk merchant, yet gave up everything in his spiritual marriage to his Mystical Wife, Lady Poverty. And St Francis, as a monk and a deacon, devoted the rest of his life to serving God and the people of his society.

One of the first followers of St Francis was the affluent noblewoman St Clare of Assisi; she left her fortune and also took up a life of poverty, simplicity, prayer, and service.

Indeed, thousands upon thousands of men and women throughout Christian history – and in the present day – have renounced their possessions, taken vows of poverty, and entered the monastic life to love and serve God and their neighbor.

But, most of us are *not* called to the monastic life. We do not take vows of poverty. Unless, of course, we become artists, farmers, or school teachers. We live out our

¹ Anthony responded to the related version of this teaching in the Gospel of Matthew, 19.21: “if you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor...”

Baptismal Covenant in the world, in society. *With possessions*. We attempt to love God and love our neighbor while *we have things*.

So what do *we* do with a teaching like this?

When Jesus the Wild Lion roars at us ... what do we do ... what does it all mean?

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Three weeks ago, Emily distinguished between “the Lesser Peace” and “the Greater Peace” when she preached on that hard text in Luke 12.

“Jesus said, “I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! ... Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! ...

father against son
and son against father,
mother against daughter
and daughter against mother ...”

Interpreting this discomfoting text, Emily suggested that the Greater Peace will come at the cost of the Lesser Peace.

With today’s text, I suggest that the Greater Possession will come at the cost of the Lesser Possession.

And at the heart of the matter is the meaning of possession and possessing.

When Jesus says that we must “give up all of our possessions” he is challenging us to ask what it really means to possess things?

When we “possess” something, we tend to think of it as *our own*, as if *it belongs to us*. And, so often, we identify ourselves with our things ... with material things like land and house and car and clothes and electronics and money and books and pictures and stuff ... and stuff ...

Do we possess these? Are these *things* our possessions?

Is my house and car and clothes and electronics and money and books and pictures ... all my stuff ... is it really mine? Does it belong to me?

When I think about it, is *anything* really mine? Is anything really yours?

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In a limited sense, we tend to think of *our* possessions. *My* stuff. *Your* stuff. But Jesus, I think, is teaching us that this attitude toward material things is the Lesser Possession.

And when he says “Whoever does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters ... and even life itself, cannot be my disciple” he is opening up a deep truth about life, about reality, about the Greater Possession.

I don't think he literally means to hate your family and your friends and your life – Jesus clearly loved his family and his friends and his life. He loved fiercely and he lived fully.

And I don't think he means you can't have a shovel or a raincoat or a house or a mule or a car or an iPhone or a gold ring or a piano or an estate or a gooseneck rocking chair handed down through the family. I think he means *we must relate to things without “possessing” things*. That is, we can have material things – and to live in the world and serve others we *need* material things – but we must *have* them without *possessing* them. We must welcome them, enjoy them, take care of them, use them, hold them, be stewards of them ... but not possess them.

Because ... we cannot.

Truly ... we cannot possess *anything*.

You and I ... deep down ... we know something that Jesus knew: the fundamental law of the universe is change. Everything changes ... everything is the way it is just for a little while.

The folk wisdom with which we are all familiar has taught us this.
Old sayings like ...

You come into the world with nothing and you go out of the world with nothing.

You never saw a hearse with a U-Haul Trailer behind it.

And most familiar of all ...

You can't take it with you. You can't take it with you.

This folk wisdom may help us break into today's Gospel in which Jesus reveals the secret of the Greater Possession.

And the secret of the Greater Possession is ... that there is No Possession.

You can't take it with you.

You can't take it with you because you never had it! You were just borrowing it the whole time!

All this stuff in our lives ... it's just ... it's just on loan from the universe. And we are going to give it all back, sooner or later.

The Greater Possession comes at the cost of the Lesser Possession.

And this is wonderful ...

In our lives as disciples, as followers of Jesus we are called *to let go*. Let go of the Lesser Possession which is our clutching and clinging, our groping and grasping at things. This includes material things but I think it includes some immaterial things,

too. Like our opinions and our emotions. Sometimes we hold onto those as if they were possessions. And, as Emily talked about last Sunday, sometimes we identify ourselves with our opinions and emotions.

As if we *are* those things ... but no ...

You are not your opinions and emotions. And you are certainly not your boots or your bank account.

You are so much more ... You are the beloved daughter of God ... the beloved son of God ... whom God has chosen this day and every day to love and to cherish. You are sealed in Baptism and marked as Christ's own forever. You are the most beautiful creation of the universe.

And sister ... brother ... once you and I get that ... *we are alive* ... alive with the life that Jesus calls us to ... living, loving, liberated life.

Life like a song ... like a beautiful, beautiful song.

Not the Lesser Possession ... life strangled by clutching and clinging at stuff ...

But the Greater Possession ... life flowing freely like love, like music ...

And so we have people and things in our lives, but we let go and we let God ...

And we wear the world like the loose garment that it is
so that we can follow that Wild Lion
and dance to the music.

Amen.