

Sermon for Pentecost 22 (Proper 23A)

October 12, 2008

Christ Church, Andover

Jeffrey Gill

Exodus 32:1-14; Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14

Yesterday was such a beautiful day, I got on my bicycle and took a nice ride through Andover, North Andover, Boxford, and over to the Topsfield Fair and back. I don't think there's a more beautiful area in all of New England than these towns. The trees were pretty much at their peak for color and beauty. The temperature could not have been more pleasant. As I was riding along it was hard not to think that this is just about as perfect as it gets — people out enjoying themselves on a picture-perfect New England fall day.

It was really hard to reconcile what I was seeing and feeling, with all the doom and gloom news we are hearing these past few weeks. It has been another terrible week. The stock market continues to plunge – over 2,000 points in the Dow Jones since the beginning of October – or 20% of its value in just 10 trading days, 40% since its peak a few weeks ago. Unimaginable. How do we square what looks like life as usual, with what we hear is looming? The sky doesn't seem to be falling – at least not yet.

And yet, I know that many of us are watching retirement savings lose value day by day. Those who are already retired wonder if they'll have enough to live on, and those who are still working wonder how much longer they're going to have to work than they thought when times looked better – or they might be wondering if they'll have a job at all.

There are questions that none of us knows the answer to – and not just we ordinary folks, but the experts either:

- What is going to happen next?
- Will people start losing jobs if employers can't get credit to make payroll?

- Will I have a job?
- Will our home hold its value?
- Will we be able to afford college for our kids?
- Will we be able to retire?
- Will a new president know what to do with all of this?
- Will the Congress take the right steps and in the right measure?
- Is this the end of our prosperous way of life, or the end of American capitalism as some headlines predicted this week?

Nobody seems to know, and even the experts disagree about many things. We are in uncharted waters. There are things that we do not understand.

How are we to find some peace of mind in the midst of all of this?

I have to say that my recent month in Africa gives me a little different perspective on all of this. Of the teeming masses of people I saw in cities and villages across six different countries, very few of them have an investment account. Most don't have a checking account or a credit card. Most of the people I met get by week to week or day to day, and are happy if they're able to do that.

I realized as I flew over the continent of Africa at night just how little energy they consume compared to us here at home. The land below was dark, with only an occasional pin prick of light below. Even the cities weren't lit up anything like what we see here. If you've flown at night here you know what it looks like: you can see cities for miles by the light they emit; enormous parking lots lit up like birthday cakes; houses filled with and surrounded by light inside and out; neon lights, street lamps, light-emitting electrodes everywhere, much of it powered by CO2 emitting power plants that pollute our environment. You see cars and trucks running from place to place.

In Africa I watched people in cities and in the countryside walking endlessly, mile after mile after mile, going from place to place, to jobs and markets and churches and to visit friends and relatives. In some of the poorer countries it was only the lucky ones who had bicycles or carts on which to pile their goods, which they did

in enormous bags that they then pushed up hills and then ran alongside down the hills, as they took them to the local market to sell.

I came home from these experiences and I began to see some things here at home differently. We do many of the same things I saw people doing in Africa – we also go to and from our homes, to jobs and schools and churches, to the market, and to visit friends and relatives. But we carry big 2,000 pound metal cages with us that require us to burn enormous quantities of fuel in order to carry not only us, but those big metal cages with us, too. We've gotten to where we don't even question such things, and we consider it a hardship when the fuel to do all these things starts costing us more. For the past century, we've organized our cities and our entire lives around our highways, and life without internal combustion engines to get us around is hard for us to imagine.

The contrasts are stark and comparisons are difficult – and I'm not suggesting that we should all of a sudden become like Africa – don't get me wrong. In fact, I want some of what we have for them, too. People everywhere should not have to worry about having food and a home and the basic necessities of life. But I would not wish all of what we have on them, because not all of what we have would be good for them, just as it isn't good for us. When I think about the enormous amounts of waste we produce, from the food we throw away, to the trash we plow into landfills, to the emissions that threaten our environment and the future of the planet – it's all a measure of what we have that we do not need and cannot afford to try to sustain.

I do think there are some things we can learn from the lesser developed parts of the world that just might help us in our own situation, both with respect to living with reduced expectations, and also with respect to living in a way that is sustainable. We can do with less than we have come to believe that we needed.

Since I came back from Africa, there are lots of little things that I notice. I think a lot more before I jump in my car to go somewhere, yes, even in my 50 mpg hybrid vehicle. If I can walk or ride my bicycle, I do. Others around here have recently noticed that instead of adding parking spaces, maybe we need bike racks here at Christ Church. I think it's a brilliant idea. Ride your bike to church! It wouldn't

work for everyone, but maybe for some. Slowing down a little bit probably wouldn't hurt any of us! And we just might be in a lot better shape, too! It's one small example of the ways we need to begin to think and act differently.

I don't know what these next weeks and months hold for us. But one thing I feel pretty confident of is that one way or another, we'll come through it all okay. Life may change in some significant ways, who knows! We may have to learn to live life differently in some ways – and that could be a good thing! We are a people who have an enormous capacity for creativity and adaptation.

The gospel today is a parable about being ready, being prepared. It's one of the wedding banquet stories here in the Gospel of Matthew – an allegory in which the actors stand for specific people or groups:

- The king is God.
- The son is Jesus.
- The invited guests are the people of Israel.
- The slaves are the prophets and apostles.
- The burned city is Jerusalem (which was burned in 70 AD).
- The good and bad are the members of the church, which includes both righteous and unrighteous folks.
- The wedding garment symbolizes righteousness.

This is obviously more than a story about a king and a banquet. It is the story of salvation history in which God sent prophets and apostles with Good News, which some rejected and others accepted.

Like the other clothing metaphors in the New Testament, the wedding garment represents putting on the baptismal garment of Christ (Gal. 3:27), being attired in the new self, created in God's own likeness (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10), clothing oneself with the compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience of one who belongs to the kingdom of God (Col. 3:12) – all the virtues that will serve us well in difficult times.

These hard times are not the time to give up hope, but to devote ourselves ever more to living with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. They are the only way we will find real peace in these times.

A wise 16th century mystic, Theresa of Avila, said it this way:

In times when you are sad and troubled,
do not give up the good works of prayer and penance
which you have been in the habit of doing.
For the devil will try to persuade you to abandon them,
and unsettle you.
Rather, practice them more than before,
and you will see how quickly the Lord will come to your aid.

It is true that there are many things we do not understand at this moment, and yet, we must not lose heart. Oh, I know it's true – we like to know, we like to understand; we like the sense of control we have when things work as predicted. We believe that our peace comes from absolute certainty. But there is another peace that passes understanding. St. Paul in his epistle to the Philippians, writes those words we hear most every Sunday in the blessing at the end of our liturgy – words about the peace that passes understanding. Paul begins it by saying: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.” And in these uncertain times, may God direct our hearts and our minds to the things that truly last. May we invest in “heavenly things” and not those that pass away. And when we do, we just may find our lives emerging into a new and better place.