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Ellen Fowler Skidmore
Forest Lake Presbyterian

When the Tide Goes Out

Luke 12:13-21
Colossians 3:1-11

To be a disciple of Jesus Christ is to commit to be in a loving relationship with God.

I'll go even further. I believe that to be saved means that we are in a living, working, growing loving relationship with God.

To be saved is not primarily to attend worship, to give money, to tell people we will pray for them, to be kind, to wear Christian jewelry or to have Bible passages memorized. In order to be saved, we must love God.

And to love God is NEVER JUST PERSONAL. To Love God is always to be pulled into relationship: relationship with God through Christ, relationship with ourselves, relationship with others, relationship with the creation. To say that we are saved because WE can point to a day/time/place when we decided to follow Jesus is to be immature in faith at best and self-deceived at worst.

Please open your Bibles to the Luke passage we just read and scan those verses. How many self-references do you see in the Rich Man's discussion with himself? The Rich Man refers to himself TWELVE times in THREE verses.

*He thought to **himself**, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store **my** crops?' Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down **my** barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all **my** grain and **my** goods. And I will say to **my** soul, 'Soul, **you** have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'*

Lutheran, New Testament professor, Richard Carlson, writes: "This man is so totally self-absorbed that as he does not take others into account; neither does he take his own mortality or God into account. God, however, takes him into account (v.20). The contrast between the rich man's self-perception and God's perception is quite stark. The rich man thinks he has it made in the shade for years to come, but God judges him a fool, because his own self will be demanded that very night. He has made elaborate preparations to guarantee himself a comfortable, self-indulgent future but has not prepared for his own impending mortality."ⁱ

The Apostle Paul entreats the Christians in Colossae not to be deceived into thinking that being Christian is only about saying that they believe in God and love God. To actually believe in God

and to love God requires that we be changed by the relationship with God. To live in Christ – to be saved – to be a disciple of Jesus Christ – we must seek “the things that are above, . . . not . . . things that are on earth”. We are to love God more than we love anything else if we want to live in Christ.

These two passages of Scripture are both painful and life giving for those of us who believe in God, but who are disappointed in ourselves and in Christians in particular. If we have ever been frustrated with either our own or another’s Christian hypocrisy – then these passages are ones we need to know and to study. If we have ever caught ourselves in the grip of any of the list of vices in Colossians, if we have wondered, “Why cannot I be more patient, generous or kind!?” – then these passages are essential reading. If we have ever felt angry at losing power, control or privilege – then these passages are for us. If we feel angry, afraid or fearful of our own death, or at the death of others we loved, then these passages are what we need.

When I read the list of vices that Paul outlines in Colossians this week, I was struck with their relevance. The list is modern. Anyone but me read, hear or see evidence of “fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, greed, anger, wrath, malice, slander, abusive language, lies” this week? I can find that list on the first two pages of the newspaper or in the first 15 minutes of the news. Does this list sound familiar to you? If it sounds familiar to you say, “Yes, Lord!”

I know that we are all here because we believe in God and have very likely either made a commitment to love God or are considering making such a commitment. And, I am betting that all of us feel a twinge of fear when we compare ourselves to the rich man and to the Christians in Colossae – because they seem VERY familiar.

How can we be “rich toward God” (Luke 12:21) and how can we “strip off the old self with its practices” and “clothe” ourselves with the “new self” (Col 3:9)?

The answer that Scripture gives us is this: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your mind and all your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. What do we love more than all else? That is the path that leads to the new self and to riches towards God. Love!

Two cautions!

First, all of us at some point and some of us at every point have settled for wearing a Christian Costume. We like to appear Christian and take pains to have our public persona look good. Face to face we can be mostly kind, but in our minds and hearts we harbor resentment and anger, and online (when no one is there to look in our eyes), we can be hateful, vitriolic and lie with abandon. The problem is NOT that these things are true of all of us. The problem is that we pretend they are not true and we settle for hiding our anger, resentment and greed for about 3 hours once a week, but we never bring those things out where the light of the grace of God can help us get rid of what we cannot get rid of by our own force of will. Has anyone here ever found themselves wearing a “Christian costume” when we knew that what was underneath that costume looked more like Paul’s list in Colossians? If so, say “Yes, Lord!”

Wearing a holy Christian costume is one of the things that most gets in the way of allowing us to love God. And we have to give us the magical thinking that if we can just repress our greed, our anger, our resentment our evil desire that it will go away. We have to give up the delusion that if we say, "I am going to be more patient!" that suddenly it will be so.

Pretending to be holy and loving, repressing the anger, resentment, greed (and all the rest) we feel or deciding that today – by force of will – we are going to be more patient DOES NOT RID US OF THE OLD LIFE. The only thing that will heal us is LOVE.

Dr. MLK quote

So, the all important move is a move to self-evaluation.

- Do I feel/do/practice the things that Paul says must be given up or stripped off?
- Is my inner conversation full of self-referential pronouns [me, I, mine] and not at all full of God or other referential thoughts?
- What is it that I love?
- What is it that I cling to with fierce possessiveness? Things? Independence? Power? Privilege? Prestige?

There is an old proverb that says, "Never say that you know a person until you have divided an inheritance with him/her" Today, Scripture asks us to turn that proverb around. Never say that we know ourselves until we have divided an inheritance with others.

When we identify what makes us most angry, what keeps us up at night, and when we evaluate where we spend most of our money, time and effort, then what we love most will be in that list. And today we have the invitation from scripture to choose to love God. Love God more than all of that other.

In the uncertain hours and days after the Mother Emanuel AME murders in June 2015, there were and still are a chaotic swirl of feelings and emotions. But that even one of those personally affected by the hate of the gunman could speak words of forgiveness was beyond my comprehension or belief. It has been four years since that event that changed many lives. But after four years, I am sure that forgiveness is not a straight line or unambiguous or easy. Forgiveness even the willingness to speak the words is not something that those Christians decided to do by force of their own will. They didn't get that way overnight. The possibility of an African-American person speaking – even partially – of the possibility of forgiveness should knock us all to our knees – in humility, in gratitude, in awe and in hope. What it should do to us is knock out of our hands and hearts EVERYTHING that we love more than we love God's own self.

Back when the great recession happened in 2007-2009, I remember reading a quote from the investor and billionaire Warren Buffett who was discussing the economic destruction that was

evident in the aftermath of the financial meltdown. He said, “You never know who is swimming naked until the tide goes out.”

The tide went out for the rich man in Luke’s Gospel parable the night after he built himself a bigger storage facility, and it turned out he was naked.

The tide went out for the families of our state and Mother Emanuel AME Church and there were a lot of naked people. But – THANKS BE TO GOD – there were enough people clothed in Christ to stun the world.

When the tide goes out – when we die – when we lose our child or spouse – when we lose our health – when we lose our privilege, power or even when we lose our things – When the tide goes out (whatever that means for us), will we be clothed in Christ? Or will we be naked?

If we want to be clothed in Christ, then we must start today – right now – to seek to love God more than we love anything else. Find out what is in the way and decide if we want to hold to that, or hold to God. What do we trust to save us?

To love God, we commit to be in a loving relationship with God. Do we talk and listen to God? Do we seek time with God? Do we study and read to know more about God? Are we willing to be changed so that we can be with God? Do we love God?

Let’s not wait for the tide to go out. Beloved in Christ – together we practice what it means to Love God, Love Self and Love Neighbor. That is the way, the truth and the life.

ⁱ Feasting on the Word: Year C, Vol. 3; p. 315.