

Sermon by Christopher Girata

Luke 6:17-26
(6th Epiphany – Year C)
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In our Gospel lesson, Jesus sets out a list of “to-dos” and “not-to-dos.” Jesus instructs his disciples how to live in the world, even as they remain focused on the kingdom of God. In those instructions, Jesus is explaining why this life, *our* life on earth, is important. Jesus tells us that our lives on earth are not futile and without purpose. Our purpose on earth is to find our way to the kingdom of God.

Our lives are ultimately moving us along a path. How we prioritize our lives effects the direction we choose to take down that path. Imagine that while I’ve been talking, this church and every one of us inside has been transported to the middle of a dense forest. When we walk outside these doors we see a thin trail extending on either side of us – to the north and the south – with trees flanking the path. Now we’re faced with a choice – which way should we go? At this point, both directions look very similar, a bit rocky, with spots going up and downhill, but nonetheless straight off into the distance. How do we know which way to turn? If we only had a map, we’d know which way would lead us out of the woods.

The woods outside our doors represent our lives, filled with many uncertainties each day. The map we all use to guide us is not your everyday roadmap; rather the “map” is filled with wisdom stories and traditions to keep us going in the right direction. We read from our map, the bible, each Sunday and today’s lesson points in a very clear way toward heaven. Jesus is talking about the kingdom of God as the best end to the path our lives take. But what does he mean when he says we should direct ourselves toward the kingdom of God? The “kingdom of God” is quite a complex phrase. The expression is very common, but how many of us really know what it means? True, “kingdom of God” means something unique to each person, but it is safe to say that here, in our Gospel lesson, Jesus is pointing to that which awaits us beyond our imagination. We often pray for God to work in ways we cannot hope or imagine, and I believe that we are talking about something very similar here. The

kingdom of God is not an anonymous, metaphorical, imaginary place. Rather, the kingdom of God is God's own reality, God's own truth, and a space in which we come to know the fullness of God. Heaven is where our relationship to God, whether known or unknown, swells to its fullest point. In God's kingdom, the kingdom of heaven, we know what it means to be truly humble, truly loved – truly human – for we were created to be with God.

Believers or not, it is fair to assume that virtually all of us hope to become something greater than ourselves. We all sense that there is more than just what we see around us. Humanists speak about self-actualization, the point when we come to know our true and fullest selves. They hold that they can attain fullness through their own volition – in essence, the path toward realizing their true purpose comes through their efforts alone. However, what we are witnessing in our Gospel lesson shows us that we cannot discover our fullness without guidance, and that guidance comes from outside ourselves. Our present lives are following a path that leads toward or away from fullness, and the only way we know which way to go is by following the lessons of our great teacher, Jesus.

The guidance Jesus gives in our Gospel lesson is one of priority. We may all too easily slip into the literal reading of the passage and begin worrying about whether we have too much money or too much food. Even beyond those tangibles, we may be concerned with whether we are as happy as we should be or care too much about others' approval. Jesus challenges us not to consume ourselves with the stuff in this world, but to steer our hearts and minds toward the kingdom of God, toward heaven.

Our fullness, in time, transcends our present reality. In other words, what we see is not necessarily what we get. The hope of our future as Christians is a life with God. Heaven, after all, is nothing other than living in the full presence of God. In his book, *The Great Divorce*, C. S. Lewis spins a tale of “a fantastic bus ride from heaven to hell.” In the story, Lewis offers that we all take the bus ride and we all have a choice. We *choose* to stay in heaven or hell. Lewis says that every member of the ride can get off in either place. Based on that logic, who wouldn't choose heaven? Isn't the choice obvious? Face to face with a real and living God, why would you choose to live anywhere else?

In fact, Lewis says our choice comes down to our attachments to our earthly lives. We all begin here on earth, born as helpless babies needing careful attention to survive. However, as we grow and develop, our sense of need can diminish to the point that we begin to believe that we are independent, self-sufficient people who never *need* anything or anyone. Our sense of independence can push us away from others, and tragically, away from God. Our lives are ultimately a choice between heaven and hell. The horror of this life would be finding ourselves outside the glory of God's heavenly kingdom, alone and separate from God. In essence, heaven brings us to fullness with God, and hell keeps us utterly separate from God.

Earth, then, becomes like the middle of our wooded trail – the path leading to both heaven *and* hell. Our choice lies with our willingness to accept our lives on earth as a temporary means to attaining a life with or without God. Lewis writes, “If we accept Heaven we shall not be able to retain even the smallest and most intimate souvenirs of Hell. ...any [one] who reaches Heaven will find that what [they] abandoned was precisely nothing: that the kernel of what [they were] really seeking even in [their] most depraved wishes will be there, beyond expectation, waiting for [them].... But what, you ask, of earth,” Lewis continues. “Earth...will not be found by anyone to be in the end a very distinct place. ...Earth, if chosen instead of Heaven, will turn out to have been, all along, only a region in Hell: and earth, if put second to Heaven, to have been from the beginning a part of Heaven itself.” Lewis believes that choosing to live our earthly lives for our own gain will ultimately lead us away from God. We are called by Christ to choose – to make an intentional choice to live our lives for God in the hope of realizing fullness in heaven.

By living into the truth that our lives on earth are merely temporary and that we can only fulfill our humanity by seeking God's guidance, we come to the understanding that this life on earth is the beginning of our journey toward God. We have already begun to move, but our journey is not yet complete. Today we can choose to move away from God, *or* we can choose to move toward God. God is waiting to guide us. Our map sits open for us to use – now we must make the choice. Amen.