

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

Sunday, July 31, 2022

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

The Rev Dr Scott Couper

“Soul Investment”

Christian Scripture: Luke 12:13-21



I am so blessed to belong to Centre Church because this community substantively discusses the nature of God and the richness of our faith tradition. We do so through Pub Theology, that Matt and Daniel have so beautifully led for well over a year. Martha and Lynn join Gisela, who is with us in spirit, as faithful regulars in the Thursday morning devotions. Roger Brown is a thoughtful and helpful contributor to our Sermon Discussion Group. Tomorrow, our Christian Theology gathering reconvenes to discover and apply to our own lives the ministry of the German pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

As a faith community, we read devotionals, we interrogate sermons, we discuss (from a spiritual vantage) over a glass of wine, a soft drink, a beer, or water, current events, and we educate ourselves about the scriptures and the lives of saints. We do so not for intellectual edification, but to deepen and enrich our faith so that we interact with the world in a way that is *more faithful than we did before*. More faithful than we did before. We do not expect to completely rid ourselves from all wrong, or sin, for we all are, and forever will be, partially in error. We do not seek to be completely right, or sinless, for we all are imperfect and, while physically on this earth, we will never be perfect. Yet, friends, we seek to move in the right direction. We are present worshipping in this sanctuary to move closer to the ideal. We join Pub Theology, Christian Theology, the Thursday Devotional, and the Sermon Discussion forums because we want to think differently and act differently in the word than we previously did. For all of us, this is a long-term project. Speaking for myself, I am what one country western song says, 'a work in progress'. And we are together, as a church, so that we may be 'works in progress' together.

Some months ago, Al Rydant proposed to Centre Church that due to the negative social implications and the corporate abuse present in Facebook our church move away from this platform. I pray we do not lose sight of Al's proposal. While we have not made hard and fast decisions in regards to Al's proposal, he has

changed me and how I think. In my personal life, he has changed my social media habits for the better. While we have not yet absolved ourselves as the church of social media ills, and never will we completely, I pray that we will, and I will work to, move in the right direction. Likewise, Margo Neale has taken the heroic task of creating an environmental forum outside our church in which many of you have participated. Of course, Margo is not going to solve the climate crisis. The growing forum, now meeting in the parlor, does not expect to solve the crisis either. But, thanks to Margo, we are moving in the right direction. We will never be completely innocent Christians, leaving no carbon footprint in our world. But as people of faith, we seek to and we take incremental steps to move in the right direction.

This past week, Pope Francis asked for forgiveness without much, if any, qualifications or excuses for the church's participation in the cultural genocide and the mass abuse of indigenous people on the North American continent, specifically in Canada. In many ways, this act does nothing to actually reverse or compensate those who were, at best, rendered aliens in their own land or, at worst, exterminated. In many ways, the apology this week is a massive act of bravery by the pontiff, for which he deserves individual credit. Yet, as leader of the Catholic faith, he does not simply represent himself. Francis also represents the entire Catholic church. As far as I am concerned, he represents all of Christendom.

In fact, Francis represents all of humanity in his humble act confession and asking for forgiveness. Nonetheless, Francis and the church is *still* guilty of gross sin and abuse. Though it may be the Body of Christ, the church has not yet actualized, as an institution, the Kingdom of God on Earth. Yet, it is, I pray, moving in the right direction.

This morning, I propose to the congregation, and thus to Council, Finance Committee, and the Endowment Committee that our church, first, research and, second, consider re-investing our church's investments into portfolios that contribute as much as possible to sustainable economic growth, ethical corporate practices, and environmental sensitivity and protection. None of our actions, including those of financial management, will ever be free from the taint of sin. Yet, we can, should, and must as a people of faith move in the right direction.

At the end of June, I sold my home in Massachusetts. After several weeks of research with my Certified Financial Planner, I requested the proceeds from the home sale be reinvested in a Sustainable Equity Strategy. I do not mention the investment firm in this sermon, so that it is not viewed as an inappropriate advertisement. Nonetheless, I have passed-on to the Finance and the Endowment committees the documentation about the investment portfolio and the firm that administers it. The point of my mentioning this is that as an individual, I am taking a small step to move in the right direction. As a member who contributes a tithe

of my income to this church, I would like it as a collective to also move in the right direction. As a member of the church, I am a part of you and you are a part of me. I pray that we will all move forward in the right direction.

I invested my money in a portfolio that applies what is termed 'general avoidance criteria' to its stock selection process. The portfolio seeks to avoid companies that derive revenue from alcohol, tobacco, gambling, weapons, or nuclear power. The portfolio also discriminates based on a company's record on public health, the nature of its products, and its overall corporate citizenship. The portfolio selects companies that have high ratings for practices and policies that protect the environment, create and maintain a fair workplace, make a positive impact in the community, foster sustainable supply chains, produce a quality product, and result in good governance and transparency.¹

After listening to and praying about our scripture reading this morning, I anticipate that the number one complaint I will hear during the Thursday afternoon Sermon Discussion Group is, "Scott, you are a gutless turd. You did not preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. Your sermon was too reserved, it was too cautious, it capitulated to the forces that cause your own greed and that of our country's". This would be a fair criticism of this message and me. Jesus' parable as recorded in Luke condemns, in no uncertain terms, the man who seeks to store his

¹ "Sustainable Equity Strategy", Neuburger Berman, 3.

wealth for retirement or for, if you will, 'a rainy day'. I confess and I apologize to you all that my proposal and this sermon do not nearly go far enough. On Thursday, I might ask to all gathered, 'do we really believe what Jesus taught'? Are we really followers of Jesus' way? I will confess to you all that in many ways that I fail to follow in Jesus' way. Yet, what is worse to say?: "I am a Christian and I reject the teachings of Jesus. To earn and to store wealth is the American Way and that is the way I chose. In addition, the American Way is to accumulate money by any means necessary, without regard to how money is saved, invested, or spent" or "I am a Christian and struggle with the radical nature of Jesus' teachings. God's ways are difficult to follow in this world. Yet, I seek to learn and to move in the right direction toward God's will". The first makes me a hypocrite of the worst order condemned by Jesus. The second makes me a sinner, who acknowledges sin, repents, asks for forgiveness, seeks to move in a different direction, and hence is saved by the grace of God.

As a special dedication to all those who are studying Dietrich Bonhoeffer with me, let me conclude this morning's message with a quote from his first book *Sanctoum Communio* (or 'Communion of Saints'). *Santorum Communio* is the seminal text on which Bonhoeffer's later texts about ethics and how we are called to be disciples of Jesus in this world are premised. Throughout Bonhoeffer's life he struggled with individual sin and societal sin and how the two interrelate.

Bonhoeffer affirmed the lesson of Jesus' parable of the Rich Fool when he understood that sin is ego-centrism or narcissism. Bonhoeffer stated, "Sin is the will that in principle affirms as valuable only itself, and not the other, and acknowledges the other on its own terms²...Instead of being directed to the other, both to God and other human beings, love is now extended only to the self. Everything becomes a means of self-seeking".³ That, my friends, is sin as narcissism. Bonhoeffer communicated in *Sanctorum Communio* that "It is not only individuals then, but communities as such in their corporate activities which must hear the Word of God in their historical situations' ... 'God does not desire a history of individual historical beings, but the history of the human community...In God's eyes, community and individual exist in the same moment and rest in one another'".⁴

Friends, I ask this morning that I rest in you, the church, and you the church, rest in me. May we together move in the right direction. May we invest not in ourselves alone, nor in the market alone, nor even in the church as an institution alone. May we invest in our souls.

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, SC 248, SC-E 118. Found in: Clifford Green, *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, William b. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 49.

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 248, SC-A, 128. Found in: Green, *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality*, 49.

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, SC 51, SC-E 80. Found in: Green, *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality*, 43.

This was the word of God. And it was preached to the people of God. And the people of God responded, "Amen".