

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
August 10, 2025 – The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
Isaiah 1:1, 10-20; Psalm 50:1-8, 23-24; Luke 12:32-40
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

Before we consider today's lessons from the New Testament, I want to speak briefly about our lessons from the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible. The great Hebrew prophet Isaiah speaks from God's point of view and denounces the Hebrew people for offering sacrifices that God does not desire. Isaiah also speaks for God in telling the people what God does desire: "cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow." We find the same message in many writings in the Hebrew Bible, and we recognize the way Jesus' teaching repeats this message. As a footnote here: when the Bible speaks of helping orphans and widows, we can read this as helping "the most vulnerable of people in need" because in ancient times these were groups of people who did not have others to provide for them – parents and husbands.

When we read a portion of Psalm 50, did you notice the phrase, "sacrifice of thanksgiving"? In Eucharistic Prayer B, the priest says, "We celebrate the memorial of our redemption, O Father, in this sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving." The idea of a sacrifice of thanksgiving has its roots in Jewish thought. When a person received a blessing, it was expected that the person would make a sacrifice to God. The biblical concept of sacrifice is to give something so that we no longer control or possess it. A sacrifice of thanksgiving was not just a "thank you, God" prayer. The person was expected to praise God for God's goodness, certainly, and also make a sacrifice, such as giving alms to someone in need. The offering ought to be what God desires. Not an elaborate religious rite, but something along the lines of what we heard from Isaiah.

Understanding the concept of a sacrifice of thanksgiving is very important. This is the rationale behind the United Thank Offering: when you receive a blessing from God, you put money in a blue box, money that will be collected by the wider church and given to projects that do God's work in the world. A few coins may not be much of a sacrifice, though, and the connection to helping others might seem rather remote. There are ways to make a sacrifice of thanksgiving more personal. Perhaps if you are healed from a disease, you might give a donation or offer your time to a related charity – the American Heart Association or the American Cancer Society, for example. As you pick up your prescriptions from the pharmacy, you might have compassion for the people in the world who do not have access to the medical care we have. In compassion you pray for people who need medicine and consider donating to Doctors Without Borders or writing a letter to your government leaders to plead for better medical benefits for the poor. I think the sacrifice of thanksgiving has the potential of not only encouraging us toward sacrificial giving, but also to growth in our compassion for others. Surely that is a goal of spiritual life and a vital part of following Jesus.

In today's reading from Luke's Gospel, Jesus begins by telling his disciples that they need not be afraid because of God's promise: "it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." Faith is trusting God's promises and God's Word, even when from a human point of view, they seem impossible or hopeless. Faith may give us the strength and courage to do what Jesus told his disciples to do in the verse preceding our lesson: "strive for God's kingdom" (Luke 12:31). In Jesus the kingdom of God had come near, as he taught about God's love and mercy, healed people, forgave sinners, fed thousands of people, raised people to new life. Jesus wants us to strive for God's kingdom, without fear or worry, but with trust in God and in the fact that it is "[our] Father's good pleasure to give [us] the kingdom."

The next words of Jesus reiterate the lessons about wealth that we have recently considered in Luke's Gospel and the messages we discussed earlier. "Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys." Striving for God's kingdom unquestionably involves helping others who need help, sharing our gifts to relieve human suffering. That might involve selling our possessions. It might also involve living more simply and frugally, so that we have more to give. In our time we are also mindful of how living more simply impacts the welfare of God's good earth.

We are told throughout scripture that we are to give God the first fruits of the harvest, the best animal of the herd, significant and sacrificial amounts of money to support those in need and houses of worship. We are not to give God what is left over – if anything – after we have spent whatever we have on ourselves. This may not be easy. "Striving" isn't easy. But it is part of living out our trust in God's vision for humanity and part of putting our treasure and our hearts in heaven. In the church we often use the phrase, "time, talent, and treasure." We have been blessed with all three, to different degrees. As I so often say, we need to apply the lessons of scripture to our lives according to our circumstances. There is no "rule" that applies to everyone, except the "rule" of compassion and generosity.

Recently I read an article in the newsletter of The Society of the Companions of the Holy Cross, an organization of Christian women who embrace certain goals of living, including simplicity of life. One woman wrote about "The Joy of Giving," and I would like to share some of her words with you. This reflection is about giving money, but we might also apply her words to giving our time and talent, to sharing any of God's gifts and blessings.

"Money is a sacrament. What we do with our money is an outward and visible sign of what we value. Giving is a spiritual act, and it shapes us. It's not so much that we give because we are generous, rather, as we give, we become more generous. It does not matter whether we have a little or a lot. Each of us is called to give according to our means. As we give, we become more open-handed and more able to receive what God so generously wants to give us. Not only does our giving follow our hearts, our hearts also follow our giving. Being openhanded is one of the ways that we manifest being made in God's image. Let us alljoin in the divine joy of giving." (By Companion Alinda Stanley.)

What beautiful words to describe what has been called "God's economy." "Jesus told his disciples, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it' (Matthew 16:24-25). When you receive the bread of the Eucharist, think of how you must be open-handed to receive the bread of heaven and remember that you are called to be just as open-handed in giving.

In the second part of our lesson from Luke Jesus teaches his disciples to be prepared for action and to be awake, "for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour." Jesus had promised his disciples that he would return after his resurrection, but that hadn't happened by the time the Gospels were written. It hasn't happened yet. We are still waiting for Christ's Second Coming, his return "at an unexpected hour." We need to be ready. How? By being faithful followers of Jesus, taking him at his word, trusting in his promises and his guidance for how to live. This is a lifelong endeavor. May God help us, step by step. In Jesus' name. Amen.