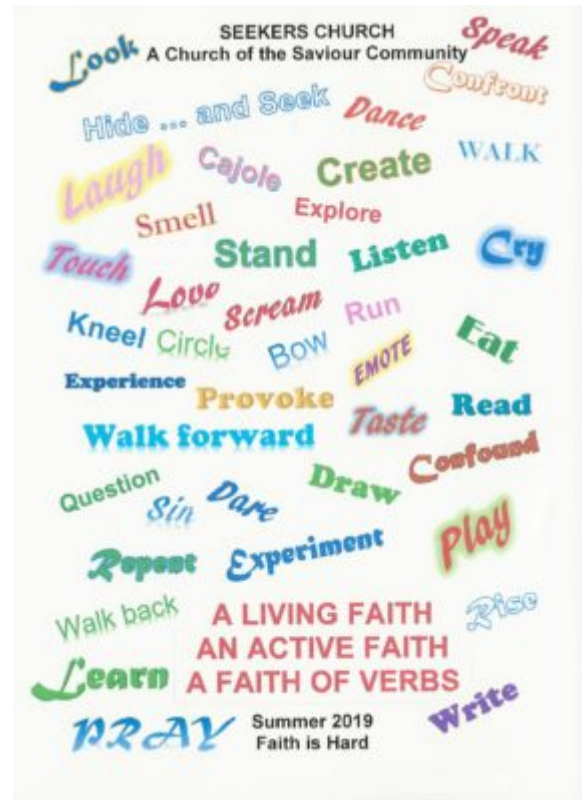


“Do Not Worry and Stay Alert” by Elizabeth Gelfeld

August 11, 2019



The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Saint Maximilian Kolbe was a Polish priest who provided shelter for thousands of Jews in his friary and was an active voice against the Nazi violence. He was arrested by the German Gestapo and imprisoned at Auschwitz. When a fellow prisoner escaped from the camp, the Nazis selected ten other prisoners to be killed in reprisal. As they were lined up to die, one began to cry, “My wife! My children! I will never see them again!” At this, Maximilian stepped forward and asked to die in his place. His request was granted, and he led the other men in song and prayer as they awaited their deaths. Maximilian had also lived in Japan and founded a monastery on the outskirts of Nagasaki. Four years after his martyrdom, on August 9, 1945, the atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki, but

his monastery miraculously survived. Maximilian's feast day, when Christians around the world celebrate his life and sainthood as a hero of the church, falls one week [on August 14th] after Nagasaki Day. Each year, we spend the week reflecting on the best and the worst that human beings are capable of. [footnote 1]

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together find favor in your heart, O my Beloved, my strength and my joy!

The gospel we read in Luke today is part of a passage that, in the New International Version, has the heading "Do Not Worry." Right before today's reading, Jesus tells his followers to consider the ravens, how God feeds them, and the lilies, how God clothes them. And Jesus says, in Verse 29, Do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; ... But seek the kingdom of God, and these things will be given to you as well.

He continues, as we heard today: Do not be afraid, for your Abba – your loving parent – is pleased to give you the kingdom, the realm, the universe, of the Holy One. Therefore, as we have no need to fear anything, there are two things we are to do:

First, "Sell what you own and give the money to poorer people. ... For wherever your treasure is, that's where your heart will be also."

Second, we are to be ready, alert, and waiting for the kingdom of God.

Usually, when I begin to prepare a sermon, my first impulse is to find the experts, someone who can explain the scripture lessons to me, so then I can explain them to you. But this time, maybe because it's August and we can be a bit more relaxed, I decided to do it differently. Here at Seekers, we

believe that God speaks to each of us. What if I took that seriously? What in God's Word might I hear, if I actually listened?

So, I devoted some time to *Lectio Divina* with this passage from Luke's gospel. The phrase *Lectio Divina* is Latin for "sacred reading." It is an ancient form of Christian prayer, a way of meditating on a passage of scripture and listening to hear how the Holy Spirit is speaking to me, through these inspired words, here and now.

Lectio Divina begins with reading a short passage. Then, as you meditate on it, you pay special attention to any words or phrases that stand out for you.

For me, what stands out is this: "Sell what you own and give the money to poorer people."

Lately I've become interested in a small category of literature that might be called "a year of living . . . X" – with X describing a practice the author follows for a year and then writes a memoir about it. In the religious subcategory, probably the first of these books is *The Year of Living Biblically*, by A. J. Jacobs, subtitled *One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible*.

I'm reading a book by Rachel Held Evans titled *A Year of Biblical Womanhood: How a Liberated Woman Found Herself Sitting on Her Roof, Covering Her Head, and Calling Her Husband "Master."* What she did was to spend one year seriously studying and, as much as possible, living according to all the rules and restrictions and admonitions for women found throughout the entire Bible.

It's a really good book. Brian McLaren wrote that

“it’s about ... how we read and interpret the Bible, ... and how we – both men and women – grapple with issues like justice, charity, silence, and grace in today’s frenetic world.”

So, influenced by Rachel Held Evans as well as my own *Lectio Divina*, an idea came to me. I decided to spend one week living, in some small way, literally, this passage from the gospel of Luke.

Obviously, I had to sell a possession. I know, for some of you this is no big deal. You advertise and sell things you no longer need or want. But for me it was a stretch. I confess that I find it easy enough to give money, which simply means that I have more than I need. And I give away many possessions because I like decluttering but I don’t like adding things to the landfill or the Great Pacific garbage patch, so giving my things to organizations that will take them is a win-win.

Selling my goods, on the other hand, is a lot harder for me than driving over to Value Village and handing my bags and boxes off to the nice person receiving them, with whom I don’t have to have a relationship beyond saying “Thank you” and “No, I don’t need a receipt.” Plus, I can shop while I’m there. However, in order to live this passage literally, I had to sell something. I chose my old hiking backpack, because I recently bought a new, lighter-weight pack for long hikes.

So, I typed eBay into my search engine, and the first thing that popped up was an ad for eBay at Amazon, which surprised me. Apparently eBay has evolved from the eBay I had heard about, oh, maybe 20 years ago, which I thought was simply the online auction house for person-to-person selling and

buying of goods. Apparently, now you can be an eBay seller on Amazon.

I kept searching and finally found the eBay website. But it looked like just an online store for buying things. I could find nothing on the home page about selling. So I typed into my search engine “how to sell on eBay” and was directed to a helpful article on wikihow.com. This article began with the basics; Part 1 was titled “Getting Started on eBay.” The first suggestion was to “Explore the site at bit,” starting with, “Check out eBay’s seller information pages,” and then, “Experiment with eBay’s search features, and browse a few listings.” Following those directions, I searched around the categories of products and finally landed in hiking backpacks. I clicked on the top-listed one and was taken to the page for a brand new backpack, which looked identical to a page from REI, or Amazon, or any other site where I might look for a new product. Where was anything that might tell me how I could sell my backpack?

I backed up and clicked on a listing that read: “Osprey Kestrel 48 M/L Backpack For Hiking Backpacking Brand New W / Tags Blue”

That was better. “Brand New W / Tags” told me that someone – a person! – had bought this backpack and maybe decided she didn’t want it after all. But although the page told me how to buy this backpack, I couldn’t find information on the seller – which I wanted because I had no clue how to write my own seller information. I did see, on the left, just underneath the photos of the backpack, the line, “Have one to sell?” followed by a button I could click to “Sell now.” I resisted that temptation, for the sake of my research. I knew I had better follow

all the steps to becoming an eBay seller.

Going to my email inbox for a moment's relief, I saw that I had received an email from eBay, which said in the subject line, "Elizabeth, thank you for joining eBay!"

I looked again at the Amazon ad and at least found the seller information – in a box on the right-hand side of the product page. Returning to the Osprey backpack on the eBay site, I finally found its seller information – in the same spot on the page as at Amazon (surprise). Clearly, I was at the start of a very steep learning curve.

I returned to the eBay home page and, oh my goodness, at the top, just underneath the advertising photographs, was a small collection of "Your Recently Viewed Items," which included the two backpacks I had viewed on eBay, plus the eBay item I had viewed at the Amazon site.

My next task was to "Create an eBay account." Suffice it to say, this did not proceed exactly as described in the wikihow article, because eBay seemed to assume that I was buying, not selling. But I did receive a "Welcome to eBay!" email, which included a button I could click in order to list items to sell.

The process of writing and posting my listing, including photographs, took another hour or so. That done, finally, I left for a long weekend of camping and hiking with several other Seekers. When I returned three days later, I had a message from eBay telling me that someone from Singapore had offered \$150 for the backpack. And I was only asking \$100. But there was a later message saying that the offer

had been withdrawn.

My pack is still for sale. If you or anyone you know wants a gently used pack for backpacking, make me an offer. Just remember that whatever you offer will be given to someone in need. And you know what? The giving can continue. The person who buys my backpack could use it for awhile, then sell it and give that money away. And then the new owner could sell it, and on, and on.

Where is your treasure? To what do you dedicate your hours and days? Where is your heart?

The second thing Jesus tells us to do is stay alert and and ready for action: “So be on guard – the Promised One will come when least expected.”

Here’s how Clarence Jordan’s *Cotton Patch Gospel* puts it, beginning with Verse 35:

Roll out now and put on your pants, and turn on the lights. Be on your toes, like workers expecting the boss back from lunch, and when he comes and looks around, they’ll be hard at it. Lucky are those workers who, when the boss slips up on them, are on their jobs. I’m telling you, he’ll praise them, lend them a hand, and even invite them to lunch with him. And suppose he comes back after hours and finds them working away, they’re really topnotch workers. For you may be sure of this: if a homeowner knew what time the thief was coming, he wouldn’t allow his house to be broken into. [footnote 2]

Probably all of you have experienced waiting up in the night – for a phone call, for a plane to arrive, for the doctor to come out, for a baby to be born.

It's a different quality of waiting than, say, waiting for a baby to fall asleep, so you can finally relax. The waiting Jesus describes is alert and ready to spring into action.

And it's hard. It takes faith. What if it's 3:00 in the morning and the boss still hasn't shown up and you're really, really tired. It's waiting in faith that your life's work is not in vain, that you actually are following a holy call.

As we read in Hebrews, faith is not something we have; it's what we do. Sarah and Abraham went out from their home, not knowing where they were going. We, too, sometimes have to leave our homes – the comfortable ways we've always done things; the truth we knew, but now we doubt; the relationship that changes; the call that gave our life meaning, until the time came to set it down.

Like Sarah and Abraham, we leave our homes by faith, and we go out not knowing where we'll end up next. It's good to remind ourselves that we all are migrants, all sojourners, during our time on this earth.

Faith is hard. Sometimes faith means staying up all night. That could be a literal night without sleep, or it could be keeping faith during a dark night of the soul, when nothing feels good or useful about prayer, church, giving, or any of our spiritual practices.

A question that's on my mind these days is, how do I make sure that I stay awake, alert, and at work for the kin-dom of God – and that I don't mindlessly fall into silence and complacency while our nation is torn apart by systemic racism, massacres by

killers armed with weapons of war, environmental devastation, and a corrupt political system that perpetuates obscene wealth for a few and grinding, hopeless poverty for so many.

One thing I can do is watch for the signs of kin-dom of God in our midst – and those signs are all around us. We hear about many of them every Sunday, in our Gathering Circle downstairs. One such sign is a document that Kolya sent to the Seekers listserve yesterday. It is a pastoral letter written by five prominent religious leaders in response to the El Paso and Dayton shootings. I encourage you to read it. At the bottom of the letter is a link that takes you to a page where you can sign the letter. I did, and I even posted my action to Facebook – something I've never done before.

Another thing I've rarely done, which I am now committed to doing, is regularly calling my congressional representatives. On the telephone. Even though I really dislike making phone calls, I'm going to be making three calls per week because calling your representatives is one of the most effective strategies for waging public protest. In five minutes, I can write a script and make a call. To help overcome my phone phobia, I can find scripts online and edit them to reflect my own concerns. I made two calls last week. Probably they won't have much effect because I didn't get around to them until about 7 p.m Friday, but it's the start of a habit for me.

Maximilan Kolbe said, "These Nazis will not kill our souls, since we prisoners certainly distinguish ourselves quite definitely from our tormentors; they will not be able to deprive us of the dignity of our [faith]. We will not give up." [footnote 3]

For Dietrich Bonhoeffer, another Christian prophet and martyr in Nazi Germany, following Christ meant “living unreservedly in life’s duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously, not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world. ... That, I think, is faith” [footnote 4]

Amen. May it be so.

1. Shane Claiborne, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, and Enuma Okoro, *Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010) 399.
2. Clarence Jordan, *Cotton Patch Gospel: Luke and Acts* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc., 1969) 45.
3. Claiborne, et al., *Common Prayer*, 400.
4. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, letter to Eberhard Bethge (July 21, 1944), *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Macmillan: 1967), 202, quoted in Richard Rohr’s Daily Meditation, July 12, 2019, <https://cac.org/engagement-2019-07-12/>

¹ Adapted from Mindell, *Sitting in the Fire*, 71-73