****

**“Only a Tourist, Passing Through”**

November 17, 2019

Text: Luke 12:13-2, The Summer Day by Mary Oliver

Rev. Reed Baer, West Parish of Barnstable

It can go so good in the blink of an eye. That lottery ticket comes up big. That gal you had your eye on for so long unexpectedly says “yes” when you ask her out. The college you dreamed about sends you a bulky acceptance letter. After years of trying, the pregnancy test strip comes up the right color.

It can all go bad in the blink of an eye. A friend told me of a trip to see a friend and their daughter; as she was driving on the highway she noticed that the load on the trailer right ahead of her seemed a bit precarious, and as she prepared to back off, a railroad tie went shooting out the back of the trailer and landed right in front of her Jeep. She still has no idea how she failed to roll over as she successfully swerved to avoid the timber.

And then she arrived at her friend’s home to find them all in tears – the best friend of the family daughter, just age 8, had just been diagnosed with leukemia, and is facing 2 years of chemo.

This farmer, we are told at the outset of the parable, is wealthy. He should have not a care in the world, he should enjoy life in all its rich potential. And yet for him it is just the opposite. He is presented with an opportunity – a terrific crop – and yet he can only see this as a problem, a problem of how to store it away.

In a tight-knit agrarian society where the problem of one is the problem of all, there are at hand many who in the normal course of things would be quick to offer their counsel and share their thoughts on what to do, but the greedy farmer acts alone, in isolation – the only conversations he has are with himself. The solution he arrives at can be described in just four short words: “It’s all about me.” I’ll tear down my barns, I’ll build bigger ones, I’ll gather in my grains and my goods, and I’ll say to myself, “Self, you’ve done well.”

Think on how it could have been different.

He could have rejoiced with his neighbors in the bumper crop bestowed on him by God; he could have welcomed them into a conversation about what to do with this opportunity; he could have realized that there was a ready place for the storage of this abundance right at hand – in the mouths of those who hungered in the community.

He was, in fact, a prisoner of his wealth, ruled by anxiety over the future, dominated by greed which sought to control that future through hoarding in the present.

And then it gets worse. *“But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’”*

Andy Gustafson writes of his visit to Craigdarrock Castle in Victoria, British Columbia, an imposing mansion built in the late 1800s by Robert Dunsmuir, a rags-to-riches coal baron, one of British Columbia’s wealthiest citizens. Dunsmuir, the idol of Canadian high society, was notorious for his callous treatment of his workers, refusing all efforts to improve safety in the mines, paying the lowest wages in the industry, and when he anticipated a strike, locked out his miners and cut their pay by a third. And that imposing castle he built off the backs of those miners – he died before it was completed.

I suspect only a few of you have seen what is probably the best television drama series ever made, AMC’s *Breaking Bad*. Walter White is a likeable, good guy, a family man with a lovely wife and a teenage son with cerebral palsy. Walt is a high school chemistry teacher who out of the blue is diagnosed with lung cancer and given only a year or two to live.

“But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’”

How would you respond to that news? Would it change you? Would you live differently?

Walter White is a chemist, and when asked about chemistry in an early episode, this is what he says: “Chemistry is, well technically, chemistry is the study of matter. But I prefer to see it as the study of change.”

And in response to his diagnosis, Walter White does change. He begins a new career, one as a criminal mastermind, cooking crystal meth, all so, he tells himself, he might lay up a hefty inheritance for his wife and family. Part of the fascination of the series is watching Walter White continually coming to forks in the road, decision points where he could decide he has made enough and can get out, or instead sink to a new level of evil. In theological terms, repeatedly offered the chance for redemption, the opportunity to change for the better and begin anew, Walter White falls deeper and deeper into sin. He has broken bad.

A colleague of mine, a terrific pastor here in Massachusetts, just a couple years my senior, was making great strides in turning her church around through what is called a discipleship model of being church, a way of doing church that is less about the traditional structure of church, membership, pledge drives, boards and committees, and so on, and more about a commitment by those who try it out to growth in their faith. A great smile, tons of energy, one who joyfully embraced the challenge of passing on the faith in these times when for many church is a tough sell. But when on Good Friday she visited her family physician to check out a nagging back pain, found out that she had stage four cancer.

*“But God said to her, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’”*

The treatments have been relentless. Like anyone facing cancers of this type, it has been a roller-coaster ride, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. There has, of course, been fear, and despair, and hope, and a new appreciation of what we so often take for granted. She took a medical leave from her duties as pastor, but in a way she has expanded her ministries, by making regular postings on-line at a blog called “Caring Bridge”. She writes regular updates on her treatments, on what is going on, on what she has learned through all this.

And so one can go on-line and read about her joy in no longer having to worry about dieting – now, when she is up to it, she can eat whatever she pleases, guilt free. About how when to her surprise her hair did not fall out because of the chemo, she went to the stylist and got it dyed pink with purple highlights.

And then there is this, from a later entry: “And now I want a tattoo … I have settled on the design: I want on my left inner forearm (so I can see them) the words, “…then we will see face to face…” which is from 1 Corinthians 13:12, my favorite scripture passage.  They are also words I hang on to.  “For now, we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face…”  The face of God.  The face of Jesus.  The face of my mother.  That’s what’s awaiting me beyond this life, and it is a comforting promise.”

Friends, this is the hard and painful and beautiful truth of the matter – we are all in the position of the biblical Rich Fool, the Canadian coal baron, the fictitious Walter White, the energetic pastor with great plans. This very night, this very year, this very decade, sometime and before we are ready for it, *‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’”*

It is, in truth, a matter not of “if”, but “when.” And so, to quote Mary Oliver, “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild precious life?” How shall we respond to this graciously given opportunity?

Shall we live for ourselves, storing up our precious treasures, single-mindedly focusing on building more and more barns for the stuff which we think will save us, because it is, we foolishly tell ourselves, “all about me?”

Or shall we keep our eye on the true prize, and running the race with perseverance, be rich toward God, and thus obtaining a heavenly reward not just down the road when this precious life is over, but here, now, in this life as well? And if what it takes for you to do that is a tattoo on the forearm which says “then we shall see face to face”, maybe that is the way to go.

Or maybe we would do well to remember the lesson of the American tourist who traveled to Poland in the last century to visit the famous rabbi, Hofetz Chiam. Noticing that his room had only a table, a chair, and some books, the American asked, “Rabbi, where is your furniture?”

The rabbi replied, “My furniture? Where is your furniture, my friend?”

“But I am only a tourist, passing through,” said the American.

“So am I”, replied the rabbi, “so am I.