

August 4, 2019

"Desiring to Carry Out the Mission: Mission Distractions"

Luke 12: 13-21

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Jesus often gets at the core of who we are and what motivates us. He catches us off guard when he refuses to settle a dispute between a man and his brother regarding financial matters. He sees beyond the dispute to the core principle of the dispute and then addresses the heart issue behind that. Jesus wants to address our heart issues. Last week we began to explore our heart issues in light of the ongoing challenge from Jesus to carry out his Mission. One of those issues: do we/I really want to pray? Do we really want to ask God for what we need? And what about if our desires don't line up with Jesus' desires for us? Then what do we do when we find ourselves desiring things and relationships that are against the Mission, indeed, against the Lord Himself. Then what?

Let me take you on a journey that is an exposition more of our own culture and selves than the Scriptures, but how we exposit ourselves also tells us how we exposit or understand the Scriptures. Do we even know what we desire? And if we do, can we admit to ourselves and to the LORD? That is the reality: we bring both ourselves and the Scriptures to an understanding of God's Word. Let me take you to a strange place nearby.

Suppose we take a tour of one of the most important religious sites in our area. It is the kind of place that may be quite familiar to many of you, but I will try to make it stranger, to take off the scales of mundane familiarity. It will be as if we were Martian anthropologists or time travellers from the past. We will see it through new eyes. Dr. Jamie Smith helps me with this.

Here are our observations as we go on this journey together: At a distance, notice the sheer popularity of the site, with a large colorful sea of parking. The site is throbbing with pilgrims, every day of the week. Thousands and thousands go there. Cars and vehicles of all kinds line up, as devoted pilgrims ready themselves for the rituals inside. The parking lot is like a moat around a castle, excluding sidewalks and pedestrians. The sacred building provides a sanctuary away from the incessant culture of automobility. We finally find a haven for our vehicle.

We note many pilgrims are finding their way to the dazzling array of glass and concrete, with recognizable ornamentation. This particular site is a part of an international network of well known religious communities, one might even call

"catholic," because they can be found in almost any city and recognized there. The large glass atriums in the entrances to the building are framed by banners and flags, with familiar symbols and texts that help the foreign faithful feel at home quickly, to be able to discern what is inside almost immediately. The sprawling layout of the building is reminiscent of ancient cathedrals with their many chapels, naves and larger pavilions and sanctuaries throughout.

As we enter the space, we are ushered into a narthex of sorts intended for receiving, orienting and channeling new seekers, as well as a bit of decompression space for regular worshippers. Because the building is so large, even labyrinth like, there is a place like a map that will help pilgrims in their journey at that place, aiding both the faithful regulars and the new pilgrims in their quest.

The inside of the building is almost excessively inviting us to small interior spaces, with only some sky lights, but almost no windows. This conveys a sense of vertical and transcendent openness that shuts off the clamor and distractions of the horizontal, mundane world. The architecture reveals a feeling of sanctuary, retreat, and escape. It is almost as if the pilgrim is invited into a labyrinth of octagons and circles, losing oneself, in the large space, forgetting time and pressures, as there are no clocks in that place. Without the windows, the building allows us to feel as if the sun stands still in this space, not knowing if it is night or day in many parts of the building. Seasons are celebrated greatly there, with bright colours, symbols and images throughout the building, almost as if there were a never-ending litany of holidays and festivals to explore and celebrate.

The layout of this temple echoes back to medieval cathedrals: that can absorb many kinds of religious activities all at once. It is as if hundreds of chapels were buzzing with liturgies all at once, devoted to many saints and causes. There is a rich iconography within these hundreds of spaces. There are monuments to the "good life." Imaginative pictures and statues and art of various kinds depict how pilgrims might receive such into their own lives. This new global religion is offering embodied pictures of the redeemed that invite us into their lives, their daily routines, as the saints of old were evoked in icons. And we find the catholicity of the iconography there, echoing the good life found in temples across the country, and across many nations. This temple invites a rich, embodied, visual mode of evangelism that attracts us. It a gospel of the power of beauty, which speaks to our deepest desires and compels us to come not with dire moralisms but sharing a better

life together. It is a mode of evangelism anchored by a transnational network of evangelists and outreach, a unified message across the planet, putting other religions to shame, speaking a truth and power that transcends cultures.

Some chapels will have samples of what they offer pilgrims at their entrances, others have welcoming acolytes, urging expectancy for those passing by, and inviting many to come in and participate. All of us in that space know we have a need, unsure as we are of how to fill it, yet, the spirit we lead us. Combing through what the faithful call "the racks," sometimes intentional, directed and resolute, other times simply observing.

Acolytes invite us to a religion of transaction, exchange and communion. We are invited to both give and take, in this worship experience. This may involve relics of many kinds, sometimes new, but not always. We leave our donation. We take away our souvenirs and relics, blessed by those who have served us, reflecting on our next chapel and worship experience.

Well, I suppose you know what we this religious experience was: it was a trip to the mall (whether Place d'Orléans or some other favorite mall). Before you object to the religious language I used, might I note that I agree with Dr. Smith that such a trip often is both a liturgical and pedagogical experience, it is a type of giving ourselves both to the experience of shopping and to the knowledge of style, trends, and supremely to the knowledge and experience of marketing. Note how malls try to get your attention, your sense of the good life, your interest...note how this succeeds and how this fails, in your experience. Note how your desire is stirred or repulsed. And if you can't stand the mall, talk to me about what does stir your desire: the sports game for hours? A craft or hobby? The museum? An amazing music concert? Cirque de soleil? Tell me what does stir your desire.

Then reflect on that desire, and tell me why it holds your desire.

Because if we can't be conscious or aware of what is happening to us in the mall, how will we be able to reflect on Jesus telling us (and the man who wanted to have the dispute with his brother settled) talking to us about greed. What is greed? It is a chance to reflect on our own desires (negative and otherwise).

Do you know your desires well enough to list them for a friend or family member you trust? Could you do so now? If not, take the time to reflect on one or two of them and share with someone you love.

How do we get to know what our true desires are? In the story that Jesus tells us

about the man who is erecting new storage facilities for his businesses, Jesus just says it outright, from the mouth of the man in the story: "Relax, take it easy, eat, drink and be merry." (Luke 12:18) The man who was taking early retirement, was being rebuked by Jesus. You might ask if it was fair of Jesus to be this hard on this man seeking early retirement. To answer that question, we have to look at the question at the end of the story Jesus taught where he contrasts us storing up things for ourselves, but being poor in God's eyes and God's ways.

How can we be rich toward God? Here is Jesus' teaching about all of us who are retired, and all of us who are not. How are you planning to give away your life? Because you only get to keep what you give away. If your retirement is mostly about what you give yourself, please expect a frown from God. Now let me be clear: God is not against relaxing, nor against eating, nor against drinking, nor against merry making. Jesus himself went to many parties. He drank. He ate. He celebrated. He also fasted. He also prayed. We are to ask the Lord how we will use our retirement in giving our lives away. Those of us with grandchildren and great-grandchildren, know at least one way to give our lives away. But there are others. How will you honour God with the last season of your life? How will you honour God with your will?

Remember the man who had planned a long retirement but found out he had a terminal illness instead. Don't find out the hard way that your spiritual choices in the last season of your life are the most important, in many ways. Now if you are younger and working, or wondering where your life is going, the same question applies to you. How will you honour God in the season of life that you are in? Where are your desires taking you? What does greed look like in your life? Lay it out before the Lord. Old and young together.

Eventually we will all have to give away our stuff. It is a universal truth we all must face. So why not give it away now? Why not give away yourself now? That is the Mission. Giving away the Good News you have received from Jesus. Give away the life you have received from Jesus, and what He has done for you.

The desires of your heart are worth noticing and laying out before God. He may give them to you. Just as you might notice such a desire at the mall, or in sports, or in a hobby or entertainment. Note what that desire is, give it to the Lord. Ask Him what He might do with it. Transformation of desire is perhaps the greatest work in our hearts and lives. If we do not desire the Kingdom, or the King's ways, how will we carry out His Mission?

Be bold in presenting yourself to God, and your desires, no matter how negative or foul, God can change them to the positive and in bounds. Trust Him anew this day. Choose to desire His Kingdom. Choose Him anew today.

Let us pray.