

Malcolm Clemens Young
Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA Z30
9 Pentecost (Proper 14C)
16

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20
Psalm 50:1-8, 23-4
Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-

Sunday 11 August 2019 8:30 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. Eucharist

Luke 12:32-40

Farewell to My Daughter, Keep Your Light Shining

"For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Lk. 12).

Keep your light shining. I remember it as if it were yesterday. We used to live across the street from one of the last farms in Santa Clara County. We called it the Pumpkin Patch and when we heard that developers would be putting in a subdivision the next summer, my daughter and I decided to spend the day there together. She was just about to turn six.

We brought camping chairs, art supplies, our journals and a camera. We sat there in the early spring sunshine in a massive field of yellow mustard flowers with an old rundown barn in the background. Time seemed to just stand still. I have a few pictures of her wearing a black and white striped shirt. She is just shining with such inner light and smiling at me behind the camera. It felt precious because even then I knew that this moment wouldn't last forever. This week for the first time Melia is moving away from home to attend college on the East Coast.

For eighteen years she has heard me preach and now its time for her to hear from someone else for a while. This morning I want to talk about what it means to follow Jesus as we make our own way in the world. I have three sections on idols, obedience and love.

1. Idols. David Foster Wallace begins his 2005 graduation speech with a story about two young fish. An old fish swims by and says, "Morning, boys. How's the water?" They go on for a little and then one says to the other, "what the heck is water?" The idea of course is that we fail to notice much of what surrounds us. In this way we never see what is most real.

He goes on to say that it is, "weird but true that there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what we will worship." He points out that a compelling reason for worshipping some form of God is that, "pretty much everything else you worship will eat you alive."¹

"If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap the real meaning in life, you will never have enough... Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly. And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally grieve you... Worship power, you will end up feeling weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to numb you to your own fear. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart, you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out."

You do not have to be with someone for a very long time before you recognize what it is that they worship. The sixteenth century theologian John Calvin said that, "the human mind is a factory of idols."

For Wallace what makes this way of living so terrible is not that it is immoral or sinful or even that it causes us so much unhappiness but because it is unconscious or what you might call water. He calls this our "default setting." The real world does not discourage you from operating on these default settings. In fact, it hums along fueled by fear, anger, craving, frustration and worship of self. Our culture has harnessed these forces and the result has been a certain kind of wealth and freedom (along with inequality and poverty of spirit). One cost though is a terrible isolation as we are in Wallace's words, "the lords of our own tiny skull-sized kingdoms, alone at the center of creation."

Jesus says the same thing in a different way when he says, "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." For him the saddest thing about this is that God longs to be with us. Or in Jesus' language, "it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Lk. 12). Following Jesus means stepping out of our isolation and worshiping the real God.

2. Obedience. On Monday I had lunch with a friend to talk about his midlife crisis. He may be one of the most intelligent people in my life and he had done fascinating research on how people go through major life transitions. He told me that social scientists had studied the age at which people are at their best for various activities, the time before they begin to decline.

It turns out that at age 7 we are at our best for acquiring new languages. After that, as they say, it's all downhill. At 18 our brains process information the best. At 23 we are at our best for remembering new names. At 25 we are at peak muscle strength. Most Nobel Prizewinning discoveries happen to people when they are 38 or 39. A man's salary peaks at age 48.² These figures may seem depressing to some of us but the list goes on.

At age 51 we are at our best in understanding people's emotions. At 69 our life satisfaction peaks. At age 71 we have the best vocabulary. At age 74 we feel the greatest amount of happiness with our bodies. At age 82 we peak in overall wellbeing.

My point is that life is always changing. We are constantly losing something and often gaining something that we have not yet learned to appreciate. Our society doesn't recognize the value of knowing our limits. Christopher DeMuth in a recent *Wall Street Journal* article writes that, "Today's recipe for success and happiness is not to manage within limits and accommodate constraints, but to keep your options open."³

The theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) writes that what sets Christians apart from some others is that we are not trying to be more than what we are. We don't always need to be the star of the show. We are not trying to be god. He says, "Of all creatures the Christian is the one which is not merely a creature, but actually says Yes to being a creature."⁴

This means that we have God as our Lord, "an almighty Companion, who embraces [our] whole being." Barth goes on to say that, "all the virtue and activity, the joy and worth of a Christian begins with this simple fact." Because through Jesus we experience God as our Father, "we see what the others do not see." We are able to be with other people and all of creation in a different way because we follow God. Everything does not depend on us but on the one who leads us. We can let God be God.

3. Love. This brings me to my last point. Following Jesus means that we do not have an abstract or philosophical picture of God. Our faith is practical and concrete. Jesus in his dedication to following God, in his humiliation and abandonment, but also in the way God lifted him up and honored him – this reveals the love that lies at the center of all being. God loves us too much merely to leave us to our own devices.

Warren Kozak's twenty-one year old daughter asked him if at age 68 he had achieved his life goals. What he realized was that as a young person he could never have imagined his greatest accomplishments. That was because when he was younger he only had in mind professional goals. Looking back at his life he realized that what he was most proud of was his support for his wife during her fatal illness, being a good husband and father, being a loyal friend, living honestly, taking responsibility for the greater community.⁵

In short what he realized was that love is the reason we are here. And because of this love and faithfulness is what we find most rewarding. Henri Nouwen (1932-1996) was a legendary teacher at my seminary for years before I got there. He used to talk about two

interior voices. One said, "Henri, be sure you make it on your own. Be sure you become an independent person. Be sure I can be proud of you; and another voice saying, Henri, whatever you are going to do, even if you don't do anything very interesting in the eyes of the world, be sure you stay close to the heart of Jesus, be sure you stay close to the love of God."

Nouwen goes on, "You are here for just a short time for twenty, forty, sixty or eighty years – to discover and believe that you are a beloved child of God... Life is just a short opportunity for you during a few years to say to God: 'I love you too.'"⁶

Yesterday Heidi, Melia and I had a picnic lunch in a circle of ancient redwood trees. On our way back to the city the Maggie Rogers song "Dog Years" was playing on the radio with its refrain, "We will be alright." Suddenly it felt like this short trip was really a symbol of our whole life together as a family.

Coming into the Robin Williams tunnel for so long you can only see the light on the most beautiful hill. And it seemed so perfect that just that feature of the landscape was enough. And as you start to emerge at first you see the south tower of the Golden Gate Bridge and it is so amazing you want to hold on to it forever. Then the nearer, impossibly larger, more dramatic north tower appears and you can't imagine anything better. But then you emerge to see the whole city, the magnificent bridges, the Bay, mountains and sky.

I realized that is what our life is. We may love the comforts of the narrow scope of our past like that single green hill but God longs to give us the kingdom, something far more vast and beautiful.

I don't want it to end. How is the water? Always remember that everyone has to worship something. In Jesus we say Yes to our limits not as restrictions but as the boundary of the life in which God walks with us. Cultivate your relationship with Jesus and the church that tries to follow him because that is how you will see the love that lies at the center of all things.

And dear ones always keep your light shining.

¹ David Foster Wallace, "This Is Water," Graduation Speech, Kenyon College 2005. <https://fs.blog/2012/04/david-foster-wallace-this-is-water/>

² Chris Weller and Skye Gould, "The Ages You Peak at Everything Throughout Life," *Business Insider*, 17 March 2017. <https://www.sciencealert.com/here-are-the-ages-you-peak-at-everything-throughout-life>

³ Christopher DeMuth, "America's Nationalist Awakening," *The Wall Street Journal*, 19 July 2019.

⁴ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.3: The Doctrine of Creation* tr. G.W. Bromiley, R.J. Ehrlich (NY: T & T Clark, 1960) 240-1.

⁵ Warren Kozak, "Dad, Did You Achieve All Your Life Goals?" *The Wall Street Journal*, 2 August 2019.

⁶ From Henri Nowen, *Spiritual Direction*. Cited in Hardy Kim, "Lectionary Commentary for August 11, Ordinary 19C," *The Christian Century*, 16 July 2019.