

SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

August 19, 2007

Text: Luke 12:49-56

Pr. Robert Goldstein

“Interpreting the Present Time”

In the Gospel reading Jesus spoke of “interpret[ing] the present time?” This is something of what he means.

The present time is a time for living. Interpreting the present time is being able to discern how to live, how to act at that very time. For some who may be in hospice that living is a time of dying. God bless them all richly in how they live their dying. May we discern to be messengers of peace and solace in their precious moments!

For the rest of us, the present time is for living. And if we live by caring for the dying, may God bless those among us who do that caring, day in and day out.

Even in the gulags and Auschwitz’s of the death world, in which death and life were in sharpest contrast, how to live was a minute treasure barely eked out of the hard rock of the Nazi hate and callous indifference. For us, by comparison, are not our free lives abundantly rich in our present time. So how should we live in such wealth and freedom?

And yet, strange as it is, there are times in our abundant lives when we too feel like we are dying –held in the grip of death rather than the confidence of life.

I can remember when I was 8 years old reading about the horror of the Nazi death camps in the local Melbourne newspaper. As I read day after day of the horror of the assembly-line extermination 6 million Jews and millions of Gypsies and homosexuals, as I realized that my family would have been a prime candidate for those dungeons of death, death itself got a deep grip on me. I was changed into a deep sadness, often seeing life only in gray. Gray. Death was resident in my life, a cynical part of how I saw life, how I interpreted the present time for 40 years.

Then, in 1993, I was part of a VIP tour to Israel. We visited Yad Vashem, Israel's peerless Sho'a museum. Halfway through the museum I could take no more. The gray death of its photographs and piles of dusty melancholy shoes got to me. I felt nauseous as I ran outside to understand myself. Still in that secret state of death in life, the group reassembled and they selected me to lay our wreath for the dead! Me! It was a bad choice. I was very reluctant. They were very insistent. And soon I was walking with the Jewish representative full of dread as we laid our wreath in the enormous black marble yard of remembrance. I just had to stay composed for the dignity of that present moment.

But as we walked back to the group, as all embraced one another, I just broke down and cried, no, wept bitterly. No one came near to me –probably because they were unsure how to respond to my deep wailing. But I needed someone then, some angel, and at last my fellow Yalie, a Methodist minister in Chicago, embraced me and let me cry myself out. That was a great moment in my life.

From then on a deep weight in my soul, the grip of death, had been lifted away. See! The present time is for living, but sometimes death invades us and gets its grip. Angels brought me to Jerusalem and one of them held me during the exorcism of death's strange grip on me. He interpreted the present time as one for compassion for me.

We all have those angels, messengers of God, and there are times when their embrace lets us be freed from death's abiding in us. We too can be angels to others so they can reclaim the present time. In the church the office of confession, public and private, and the anointing of oils by the healing minister are both angels in waiting. Yes, the present time is for living –not with death, sin or the devil, but with clarity and simplicity of compassion.

Jesus' words today about interpreting the present time are words of anguish and words of anger. He simply anguishes about his baptism into death and the stress he is enduring until his poor life is completed, finished. For death clearly hovers near him, an ominous creature, while his disciples are complicated and clueless as to its danger.

Complicated and clueless. They are busy living in the present time, yes indeed they are! But grabbing all they can for themselves. Jumping on this winning bandwagon; Jesus' new kingdom in which they think they will profit handsomely. But it is a delusion soon to be split apart by the swords of the state's henchmen. Jesus interprets the present time far better, far clearer than they.

And so Jesus aims to shock them into reality and simplicity with words of God, prophetic words that reveal the death present in their headlong rush for fame and wealth, and their foolishness.

I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!

The present time is always for living, living like Jesus, not living in pursuit of wealth and acquisition –which are delusory and desperate attempts to push away death from our souls. For death plays that final inning with us that we can never win. Jesus is showing us how to interpret the present time: to so live each day, one day at a time, with a simplicity that reveals true happiness in compassion, courage and service.

People cry out for justice. Work for their inclusion and true equity –but it will divide you from the self-centered crowd. For those burdened by the fear of death and guilt: work to restore them to unfettered life –but others will mock you for “lack of ambition.” For those afflicted with the stages of death: care and comfort them! For those afflicted with those rotting religions of excessive guilt and institutional fear: be angels of God’s love and patience. For that is truly being Christ –and will divide you from the doctrinaire religious.

The present time is for living. But how? Into Jesus’ life and death we have been baptized. By remembering your baptism every morning in your shower, we remember we are Christ’s sisters and brothers, washed daily from the fear of death, forgiven and freed to be angels in service of a life-giving and healing Spirit, both holy and earthy. This is something about how to interpret the present time, how to live your present time, our present time. This is something of how God is in Christ reconciling the world to God’s self. Amen

St. Francis Lutheran Church
152 Church Street, SF, CA 94114-1111
Phone: (415) 621-2635; Fax: (415) 621-8819
E-mail: StFrancisSF@sbcglobal.net
www.st-francis-lutheran.org