

August 11, 2013

Text: Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16 & Luke 12:32-40

Proper 19 C

Rev. Douglas Reble

“Sweetness Or Substance?”

In the name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, grace to you and peace.

Millions of years ago, nature equipped us, through the process of evolution, with certain necessities for survival. One of the gifts we were given was a craving for sweetness. Built deep within us is a desire for things that are sweet. One can imagine the evolutionary significance of this craving. Our craving for sweetness drove us to look for sweet fruits and berries which contain valuable nutrients.

However something terrible occurred in human development, perhaps the worst of human inventions. We learned to refine sugar. Our craving for sweetness became a liability when humanity progressed to the point of being able to refine sugar. Now, we can fulfill our craving for sweetness anytime we want it. Now, we do not have to wait until we find honey in a hollow tree or when fruits are in season. We can refine sugar from a number of substances and have sugar anytime we please, liquid or solid.

You know the results. Obesity, alcoholism, rotted teeth, diabetes. A number of other health problems, all the result of a perfectly good craving fulfilled too easily, too readily through refined sugar.

In some ways this is a metaphor for dilemmas within our society today. We are able immediately, without effort, and far too easily to fulfill so many cravings. We become hooked on refined sugar, which comes to us without effort, and we neglect more substantial nourishment.

In many countries today there is a huge explosion of gambling. Don't we know it in Canada. Casinos are built, provincial lotteries take in billions. What is this except a public seeking to feed upon the sweet sugar of instant gratification without any long term effect? We want something for nothing. We dream of receiving the good life without effort. Thus, we gamble away our hard earned money in the earnest desire that we will be one of the lucky ones who receives millions with absolutely no effort on our part.

Recently the police chief of Toronto delivered a speech about the problem of crime among his inner city youth, I read a portion of that speech in the Toronto Star. I thought he had some insight. This is what he said, “These young adults, hanging around clubs and street corners in our city, are not thinking about marriage, or dreaming of owning a car and a home in the future, of having a good job even. They are cynical, disillusioned and fatalistic. They believe that the future is closed to them, that they will have short lives, so why make the effort? This is why he thinks drugs, and violence and all manner of crime among late teens and those in their twenties occurs. They feel that life is so short, that the future is so unpromising, that it is best to grab all that you can for today. Live for momentary enjoyment because who knows what tomorrow holds? He has a point.

I think this is an honest analysis of many of us, not only the young adults standing around on urban street corners but also the executives of major corporations, our political leaders, you and me. We are often fatalistic. So uncertain are we of what tomorrow holds, we seek monetary pleasures. We seek the sweetness with the substance.

Fatalism kills us. It takes a great deal of faith to take the long view, to work on projects that will not have their fulfilment in the near future. A wise teacher once told me, they were speaking about their profession, “A good teacher has got to be in love with the process of planting the seed, but cannot need to be around for the harvest.” I like that. A good teacher must constantly be sowing seeds among the students but will not be present for the harvest. There are many other occupations like that.

Preaching. How about being a parent?

Today's second reading is from the Letter to the Hebrews. It is a beautiful passage that speaks of our forebearers in the faith. The writer of Hebrews says that these people served God, without receiving any immediate reward. When they looked to the future, they had their hopes fixed upon a city, but it was not a city in the present, rather one in the future. It was a city not made exclusively by human effort but also given as a gift of God. This is faith, says the writer of Hebrews. Faith is the opposite of fatalism. Faith is that which enables us to forego the monetary gratification of sugar in order to get the substance.

Anything, worth doing takes time, effort, long term commitment, struggle, connection, steadfastness. This we know. Do we also know that about the Christian faith?

Today's gospel reading tells of Jesus' instructions to his followers. He warns us to be dressed for action, to have our lamp lit, to be ready to march at a moment's notice. He warns us to be ever vigilant, watchful.

Here is a faith that is not available to us for \$250 and a weekend. We have people in our Zion Church family, in any congregation really, in their eighties and nineties, who still can confess to being surprised on Sundays, who still lament that they've been working at this faith for a lifetime and still don't have it right. Christianity is nobody's quick fix.

Perhaps you know this. After all, you are here. You are not lounging in front of the television, hoping to get this faith through osmosis. You have made an effort. You have not arrived but you are on the way, on the journey of faith. Today's worship service may have a blessing for you. It may not. This may be your Sunday to gain clarity and surety in your faith. It may not.

Things take time here. And you have taken the time. I commend you. You have forsaken the world of quick fix, the sweetness without substance, and have come here to ponder the ancient biblical texts, to sing the old songs, to gather around a mystery that cannot be comprehended in a moment.

My brothers and sisters in Christ. Keep at it, take all the time you need. It is God's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Let us pray:

Loving and gracious Lord, we are on the way toward you, but we have not arrived. Our hearts are not as wedded to you as we would like. Our minds are not fixed upon you as we would hope. Yet, we are on the way. In each of our lives, we have heard your call. We have come forth on this summer Sunday to follow you to ponder your Word, to gain the skills and insights we need to be faithful. Stand among us, Lord. Speak to us. Show us the way. Give us the gifts we need to follow faithfully. AMEN.