

*The Nazareth Page*  
*A gospel meditation for your home*  
*August 4, 2019 – 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time*  
*Luke 12:13-21*

I was driving by an open field near where I live and wondered what was going on. The land was being cleared of trees and bushes. Perhaps a new housing development was being built for low income people, a major need in many places. Then I saw a sign erected at the edge of the property. "New public storage units coming soon." I wasn't surprised.

At least once a year, our town of a few thousand residents builds another of these facilities. And they seem needed because there are so many. I occasionally wonder what fills these locked units. Furniture in between moves? Seasonal equipment for yards or gardens? Summer stuff during winter? A friend of mine stores all his hobby stuff in one of those units. Still, I had to wonder whether many of us, myself included, may just have too much stuff.

The message of Jesus in today's gospel may not have increased the popularity of Jesus, especially among the more well-to-do. It is aimed at those who, simply put, have too much. They are well-heeled, as we say, and are greedy for acquiring more riches. Really, as much as they can. Sound familiar?

Think about the parade of commercials advertising "wealth management." The implied message is that you cannot have enough money because you never know what's ahead. You need to protect yourself and your financial resources from the unexpected. I've never heard one of these businesses suggested that you may already have enough, or certainly not "too much." They want their audience to worry and be anxious.

In this Sunday's gospel Jesus warns against the attitude of *greed*. That's because he sees that the experience of a good life, a well-lived life, a life of generosity and care for others, might be blocked when one's primary concern is personal wealth. Having too much (admittedly a very relative matter) seems to draw most of one's attention to one's possessions (financial or otherwise). They need more storage.

It's like asking someone how they are doing, and their mind automatically focuses on their wealth, not on the quality of their life. There is solid research about personal happiness that says that once you reach a certain level of wealth (enough to get by), that the level of personal happiness drops as one's wealth grows. The desires of the self outweigh the needs of others. In other words, Jesus was right.

David M. Thomas, PhD

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*August 11, 2019 – 19<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time*  
*Luke 12:32-48*

I live less than a mile from our local volunteer fire department station. It's a modest facility. Two trucks and an EMT emergency vehicle. No one lives there but when the call goes out, these first responders are there in a flash. They carry special phones so they can be alerted at any time of the day or night. I asked one of them how often they are called, and he said maybe once or twice a week. But there's never a predictable pattern. Then I asked how often he thinks about that phone he carries wherever he goes. He said, "Maybe a hundred times a day."

Today's gospel is about always being ready to respond to God's call, like our local first responders. Jesus talks about masters who come and go and servants who are always on duty. Jesus says it is wise to be aware of the master's concerns and the work expected, even when he is away. If he returns and finds his servants playing cards when they should be working in the fields, well, it won't go well for those servants.

Of course, Jesus is not describing just an employment situation. He's talking about God and us. We need to be on alert all the time. You never know when God will invite us into the fray. In fact, the expectations and demands of God are always being offered to us. To use an old saying, there is no time-out with God.

But this omni-presence of God and God's concerns need not result in our being anxious about not wasting a minute. Rather, it's simply a reminder that our lives are filled with the presence and expectations of God. And these expectations are not intended simply as a burden, but as a reminder that God's life flows into us and through us to others. That river of life is always flowing. We are privileged to be a part of God's life and God's work in the world. It's a life that has already begun for us and it will never end!

I play many roles like most of us. My roles as a parent and a grandparent have given me many joys, as well as a few sorrows. These roles are not in any way a part-time happening. At virtually any time, the phone might ring, or a message may be sent my way with a request. Or simply a reminder that I am being thought of. I am like those first responders at the fire station. I may be needed for child-sitting or a small loan or for advice on one thing or another. And there's a God-part to every request. So, I best remain ready. God's invitations take on a thousand shades of need. Or of joy and comfort which are also a part of God's ways with us.

David M. Thomas, PhD

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*August 18, 2019 – 20<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time*  
*Luke 12:49-53*

The ancients believed that the world was composed of four basic elements: earth, water, wind and fire. We might say today that this theory was pre-scientific, but still, there is a wisdom contained in their view. These elements made up most of what they experienced. They lived on the earth. Water came to provide them with food and drink. The wind brought the air they breathed. But what about fire? Well, certainly it warmed them during the cold and some groups used fire for preparing food. But there was also the fire of destruction. Thus, fire can be the source of both blessing and destruction.

In a common prayer to God's Holy Spirit, we ask that the fire of God's love enkindle our hearts. I am also reminded of what the Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin wrote almost a century ago: Someday, after mastering the winds, the tides, and gravity, we shall harness for God the energies of love, and then, for the second time in the history of the world, we will have discovered fire." In that sense fire becomes a powerful symbol for God's love and our own. In the words of today's gospel Jesus says, "I have come to set the earth on fire." Not a fire of destruction, but rather one of creative love. Recall the words of the disciples at Emmaus when visited by the risen Christ: Were not our hearts burning within us?

Sometimes we imagine Jesus as a rather quiet person. He peacefully walked the paths and roads of Israel, occasionally stopping with a supportive word for someone seeking greater truth. Or quietly healing the physical and mental difficulties of those who sought him out. He was, in a sense, easy-going, available but not pushy, certainly not calling for God to destroy those who failed to follow God's laws as then understood. He spoke more of God's mercy than judgment.

So how might we understand "the fire" in today's gospel? Especially when it is joined to a description of family disharmony and seeming conflict? First, there is the observable fact of family separation brought about, in part, by some family members afire with faith in Christ and some who are not. This is simply a statement of reality. It happened in the early church and it happens today.

After all, being a genuine Christian is not easy. The "fire" Jesus spread on the earth was fed by the flames of a fully generous love. A love that can bring peace, but it can also pull one apart by its demands. If you pray to be fired by God's love, be careful. It can get quite hot at times.

David M. Thomas, PhD

*The Nazareth Page*  
*A gospel meditation for your home*  
*August 25, 2019 – 21<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time*  
*Luke 13:22-30*

I once thought that it's very important to know everything. It was part of my religious responsibilities. I knew enough to know, however, that this was not possible, but I still believed that I should at least try to know everything that I could. So, I diligently went to school for most of my young life. I listened to what teachers said and took a lot of notes. I read the books I was assigned to read and many more besides. After completing formal education, I became a theology professor and kept listening and learning and reading. Deep down I believed that my daily life and my eternal salvation were tied to what I knew and what I did. Lifelong learning contributed to my belief that I was in charge.

As I read the gospel for today, I became a little uncomfortable. Especially the concluding words of Jesus that the last will be first and the first will be last. Of course, this makes little sense in our world (and my own) which values position and accomplishment and all sorts of criteria about who will be truly best of God's Kingdom, both now and forever. I want to think that I will be at least near the front of the line, reserved for those who did a lot for God. I thought about all the books I had read, all that I had written and all the good things I did during my life. Surely, that qualifies me for earning "early boarding" on to that final 'airplane' flight to heaven.

Now I realize that this is not the way God has arranged things. Yes, there is a divine plan that is carefully and completely established by God, but it's not the one I (and many others) create. In another part of the gospel Jesus tells us that God's ways are not our own. Actually, God's plan is a million times better than anyone you or I might construct.

Further, we do not have direct access to all of God's plan. We know some of it, but some of its deeper meaning is beyond us. Like the part that says the last shall be first. God knows what that means but none of us have a clue. If we think we do, we are wrong.

So how can we survive when we don't know the whole truth of God's intent and ways with us. We trust God! We practice what earlier saints called "holy abandonment." We place ourselves in the hands and heart of God and pray, "Thy will be done!" (Not my kingdom come.) We put ourselves and our lives and those close to us in God's care knowing that God knows best. This does not relieve us of responsibilities. It places us, however, in a much better situation where we can trust in God's help because we are where God wants us to be.

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