

Transfiguration
Dallas, Texas

Amos 6:1a, 4-7

Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16

1Timothy 6:6-19

Luke 16:19-31

The parable we heard Jesus tells us this morning reminds me of an old folktale about the nature of heaven and hell. In this story, hell is a huge banquet hall containing a long table, laden with enormous plates of unbelievably delicious food. Seated around the table are rows of miserable, desperately hungry people. Each person's hands, you see, are tied to three-foot long spoons, so it is impossible for them to feed themselves. So they fuss and fight, swear at one another, and greedily protect their food from their neighbors. All the while they stay hungry.

Meanwhile, heaven is absolutely identical. It is also a huge banquet hall, filled with a similarly lavish feast. The people in heaven gathered around the table are also attached to extremely long spoons, making it impossible to feed themselves. But here people are full and content and joyous, because...they choose to feed one another across the table.

I share this parable of heaven and hell to help us consider the parable that Jesus tells us today. We can hold onto that which is ours – we can focus all our energy on using and enjoying the stuff we possess now – but if it means we are disengaged from the needs of those around us, all we're doing is creating the conditions of our eventual misery. Or we can choose to share what we have for the benefit of others, and thereby actually experience more of the bounty of God. What we choose to do, and how we choose to live and give and share, is a big part of how we create the future we hope for.

Which reminds me of some incredible news from the country of Ethiopia from earlier this year. In a single day in July, the people of Ethiopia planted 350 million trees. Just for the sake of comparison, the previous record for trees planted in a single day was 50 million. If every man, woman, and child in the United States planted one tree, we'd have to borrow the whole population of Canada to reach 350 million trees. That's how monumental the feat was.

The organizers knew that the fruits of their efforts will not immediately solve the crisis that country faces after a century of deforestation. They know it will take decades for these hundreds of millions of saplings to grow into the forests of the future. They know it will be their grandchildren who reap all the ecological benefits of these newly planted trees. But the people of Ethiopia know something echoed by an old Greek proverb that I have come to love: *societies grow great when elders plant trees whose shade they know they will never sit in.*

Friends, the greatness of the godly is not demonstrated by our prosperity today, but by how well we prepare for those who will come after us. We will be measured by the sort of legacy we leave for the future. This sort of humility is a core Christian value. Our faith summons us to actions today that will benefit, not ourselves, but others. Like planting saplings in deforested land. Like feeding the people seated around us when we can't reach our own mouths. It is a way of living rooted in hope. Hope for tomorrow. Hope that is rooted in the promise of Christ to be with us to the end of the ages.

This hope-filled vision for the future is the heart of our stewardship campaign this year. That's why the symbol for our campaign is a growing tree. This theme is inspired by the storm that hit our area back in June. Trees were blown down all over our city. Maybe you lost some trees at your home. Here at Transfiguration, we lost nearly 20 trees on our campus – big trees that had stood tall for decades. We counted the rings on a few of them, and several had stood nearly as long as Transfiguration has been on this site. They were planted by people from our church's founding generation almost 50 years ago, people who knew it would be the Transfiguration of the future that would enjoy them.

This morning, I hope you noticed the small oak sapling standing in the Gathering Space. It will be replaced in coming weeks with successively larger trees, and they will all eventually be planted outside. Of course, none of them will be as tall as the trees we lost, and they won't be providing much shade to anyone anytime soon. But the people who call Transfiguration home 50 years from now will enjoy these trees and their shade, and they will thank God that we planted something for their sake.

This, my friends, is the essence of stewardship. This is how it works in God's economy. *What we offer to God today in gratitude for the blessings of yesterday, God transforms into the blessings of tomorrow.* Which means, by God's grace, we can grow our future.

We have such hopes for the future here at Transfiguration. Hopes for new opportunities to love others and serve people in need. Hopes for new people to join our church who have been longing to find a compassionate and inclusive Christian community. Hopes for formation classes that inspire and outreach that serves and worship that glorifies. Yes, we have many hopes.

But our ability to pursue those hopes will depend on what we choose to do today. It will depend on our generosity now – how many metaphorical and literal trees we decide to plant by our giving. Because, over the last several years, we've struggled just to maintain the status quo. Our total pledged giving has remained stagnant, but meanwhile, expenses continue to increase every year – and I'm not talking about expenses related to new programs or staff or mission. I'm talking about basic

expenses: maintenance, utilities, insurance. We've struggled at times to make it all work, and it's forced some sacrifices.

For example, I know it may seem like we are fully staffed, but it's increasingly with part-time positions. We have only two full-time priests for a congregation of 1,200, when four are recommended for that many people. And we have only five full-time lay employees, which means everyone else on staff – including almost all the administrative personnel, our sexton, our youth minister, and two of our four clergy – are part-time. If you stop to really think about how much ministry happens here every week, you begin to understand just how hard the staff works, and you can also appreciate why we've lost more than a few from the team in recent years who simply got overwhelmed by the volume and constancy of demands. And besides, it's awful hard to plant those new trees, the trees for tomorrow, when you barely have time and resources to tend to the existing ones.

I believe that what Transfiguration offers to the Metroplex is profoundly important. We are not just another church in a city filled with churches. Our devotion to practicing the compassion of Jesus is uncommon and extraordinary. We are a community of historic faith, liturgical beauty, and radical inclusivity. There are not a lot of churches out there with values like ours, who pursue the challenge of seeking and serving Christ in all persons, and we have done that passionately, consistently, and sacrificially.

And if you agree that the mission and witness of Transfiguration are important, I hope you will help us. I hope you will give in a way that can help us do more than maintain the status quo. I hope you'll give in a way that will help us stretch out our arms and draw more spiritually hungry people into our fellowship. I hope you will give with the sort of hopeful extravagance like the people of Ethiopia who planted 350 million trees in a single day, knowing they would never personally sit in their shade. I hope you'll give like the people of the Kingdom of Heaven, who feed each other across the table, so that even when we can't reach our own mouths, we are all full and fed and joyful. I hope you'll pray about what sort of a church you hope we will be next year, and next decade, and next century. Then let your hopes inspire your generosity. For it will be God's grace and our generosity that creates the future for which we hope.

So won't you help plant a few trees? They may not seem like much now, but, I promise, God knows how to grow them into something breathtaking.