

Sermon for Pentecost 6—Year C 2013
No flying, no invisibility, just go proclaim the kingdom of God
Summer Saints: Catherine Winkworth, John Mason Neale, Apostle Thomas

What is life all about?
Have you ever seriously asked yourself this question?
Have you asked it of others?
Have you ever asked it of God?

I recently began reading a fascinating novel—*The Woman Upstairs*—by Claire Massud. and I was struck by the following inner dialogue of the main character Nora—who is the woman upstairs—
She states:
Life is about deciding what matters.
It's about the fantasy that determines the reality.
Have you ever asked yourself whether you'd rather fly or be invisible?

Well . . . what would you choose?
I've asked this question many times over the years in bible studies, council meetings and Confirmation classes.
This is the first time I'm asking it of a congregation.
What would you choose if you could have only one of two “super powers”: flying or invisibility?
How many fliers do we have?
How many for invisibility?

Nora writes that she is surrounded by fliers—
But Nora says, it's the wrong choice.
(Now I'm not saying there truly is a right or wrong choice, nevertheless Nora's analysis of this choice I find interesting.)

Because Nora says being invisible makes things more real.
When you are invisible she says you get to see people without their masks.
Well that's enough to make me truly happy
that God did not give us the ability to be invisible . . . *or* the ability to fly.
Since, as Nora asserts in the novel,
flying is a desire to escape—it expresses the desire not just to fly away from danger, but also from responsibility.
As I said, I don't know whether she is right about this,
but I take her analysis of all this as particularly good food for thought.

And now we're back to where we started which was asking what life is all about and Nora's assertion that life is about deciding what matters.

But just how do we go about deciding what matters?

In this morning's gospel lesson,
Jesus has a few wisdom sayings for us to consider
as we make decisions about what matters.
In fact, the text begins by stating that Jesus has made
the ultimate decision about what matters—
He has “set his face toward Jerusalem.”
Jesus has warned the disciples of his impending suffering there
but even though they confess their faith in him as Messiah
and they see him transfigured with Moses and Elijah,
they cannot begin to imagine the horror of Jesus' last days.
Yet Jesus knows.
And he sets his face toward Jerusalem, meaning unwavering determination.
No flying away and no invisibility.
He is Spirit-filled and Spirit-led.

Normally very accepting of the Samaritans, Jesus shocks his disciples
by barely noticing the Samaritans as he heads to Jerusalem,
so concentrated was he on his up-coming destiny.
The Samaritan villagers “did not receive him because his face was set toward Jerusalem.”
Did they reject Jesus, or did they not host him overnight
since he “his face was set toward Jerusalem”?
The text doesn't say, but the disciples take it to be rejection
and impulsively ask if they should “command fire” to destroy them
-- *as if they could even do that!*

Jesus uses the occasion to speak about discipleship
and about the implications of following him.
As the text makes clear,
Jesus is speaking to those who are actually following him, not to *potential* followers.
As he often does, he speaks in exasperating hyperboles and exaggerations
in order to emphasize a point he trying to make.

Here's one of the things I think Jesus is saying,
“Be willing to let go of the past.”
There comes a time when you leave the comforts of home,
when you go out the door and move into uncharted waters.
Jesus knows that his disciples will soon be doing exactly that after he has gone.
Their lives will be radically and unexpectedly different than anything they had imagined.
They will leave behind what they have known and done
and they will go in totally new directions, doing new things.

For instance, the apostle Saint Thomas—
yes the one we usually call “doubting Thomas”—he will leave Jerusalem,
traveling outside the boundaries of the Roman Empire to preach the gospel in India

(some early traditions even hold that he also went to Persia—modern-day Iran). According to early Church tradition, Thomas traveled to Muziris, India in about the year 52 AD where he baptized several people who are known today as Saint Thomas Christians or Nasaranis.

The name Thomas is popular among Christians in India and he is often regarded by as the Patron Saint of India.

Thomas left his past . . . and heeded Jesus' words—
But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.
No invisibility, no flying. Not even any flame-throwing!
Just Spirit-filled, Spirit-led doubting and believing discipleship.

But what does Jesus mean by saying,
“No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God”?
Now I have never plowed a field, but I have seen it being done
and it seems to me that anybody who has plowed a field knows
you have to watch carefully in front of you to keep the furrows straight.
Otherwise, if you are looking backward the whole time,
you will swerve one way or another, making crooked lines
but also most likely ending up going in the wrong direction.

How ironic that that is exactly what the disciples did
in their despair and confusion following the crucifixion and resurrection.
They looked back and resumed their previous occupation of fishing (John 21:1-14).
Two of them were even walking away from Jerusalem
even after Jesus had specifically told the disciples to stay put
and wait in Jerusalem where they would see him again.
It wasn't until Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit empowers them,
that they begin their true work of spreading the Gospel of Jesus
far beyond Jerusalem and even the boundaries of the Roman Empire.

One commentator on this gospel lesson states that these verses jar us into asking:
***“How are our lives different as followers of Jesus
than what they might have been otherwise?”***

He recalled a bumper sticker that I also remembered seeing which asked:
“If you were on trial for being a Christian,
would there be enough evidence to convict you?”

**Discipleship means living in ways
we might not otherwise live.**

Our second saint for today, John Mason Neale,
is predominantly known as a hymn writer and translator.
He was born in London in 1818.

As a boy he loved reading and read everything he could get his hands on.
Ordained in the Church of England in 1842,
his poor health (a chronic lung illness) prevented him from serving as a parish pastor.
Instead, he was assigned to be the warden of a poorhouse named Sackville College.
In the course of his duties, John had many opportunities to see the misery of the poor
especially in rural villages, some of whom died unattended.
So Father Neale set out to do something about it.
He founded the Sisterhood of St. Margaret to care for the sick.
You'd think this would make people happy that the poor were being cared for.
But no!
To others in the Church of England,
this sisterhood business was too "Roman Catholic" and they were furious.
This wasn't the first time John Neale had ruffled feathers.
He had denounced churches that allowed the wealthy to box off sections of the church
to separate themselves from commoners.
Some of these elite folk even placed comfortable sofas in their boxes
where they ate elaborate lunches during the worship service.
John's appeals for the restoration of churches and for improved church architecture
angered not just the wealthy, but especially his fellow clergymen.
Even his translation of ancient Roman and Greek hymns into English
was viewed with great suspicion.
Though he was attacked—both verbally and physically—
there was no calling down fire on those who persecuted him.
It is said that his kindness, gentleness and "basic goodness"
(you know, all those fruits of the Spirit the Apostle Paul
enumerated in the passage to the Galatians we just heard)
these traits eventually won over those who opposed him so fiercely.
Not only do his translations survive today—in our hymnals and many others—
so does the Sisterhood of Saint Margaret.
No flying or invisibility for John Mason Neale.
Just Spirit-filled, Spirit-led discipleship.
Just a steadfast proclamation of the kingdom of God in word and in deed.

***"How are our lives different as followers of Jesus
than what they might have been otherwise?"***

"If you were on trial for being a Christian,
would there be enough evidence to convict you?"

**Discipleship means living in ways
we might not otherwise live.**

The overarching truth above this whole topic of discipleship—of sainthood
(of being set apart for a Spirit-filled, Spirit-led purpose)
is that being a Christian and a disciple of Jesus gives us a whole new identity.
We are no longer simply a biological unit on this earth,
but a child of the God of the whole universe.

We now live knowing that “our citizenship is in heaven”
Because our lives are now measured by eternal things,
we are “exiles and aliens” in this world,
and we no longer look at anyone from merely a human point of view.
In other words, we are called to live differently than those who are “of” the world.
That’s why our freedom as a Christian is not the freedom to do whatever we want,
whenever we want to do it as long as no one gets hurts.
Our freedom—the freedom of the Christian is a great paradox:
as Martin Luther put it:
We are simultaneously free Lords, subject to no one;
and we are a dutiful servant *subject to every one*.
Simply put—we are free to serve, to proclaim the kingdom of God—
to use whatever gifts we have (spiritual and otherwise) to do what matters to God.

Catherine Winkworth, our third final saint for this morning,
was born in London in 1827 and was a contemporary of John Mason Neale.
Like John, Catherine undertook active work among the poor,
visiting them and caring for them and teaching the children in Sunday School.
Though she was held with great affection by the poor in Manchester whom she served,
Catherine is mainly remembered as the foremost 19th century
translator of German hymns into English.
She is especially important for us for her translations of many of our most cherished
Lutheran hymns like *Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word* and
Praise to the Lord, the Almighty.
In addition to translating hymns,
Catherine was deeply involved in promoting women's rights
and higher education for women.
She died suddenly in Savoy, France of a heart attack where
she had traveled to care for a nephew who had become seriously ill.
She possessed great intellectual and social gifts, and was unusually gifted
as a translator of hymns—hymns that have proclaimed the gospel
and refreshed the hearts of many.
No flying or invisibility for Catherine.
Just Spirit-filled, Spirit-led discipleship.
Using what she had to do what matters to God.

We need to hear the stories of the lives of the saints
alongside the word of God, the word of life.
Because the Word needs to be lived out in our lives—
using what we have to do what matters to God:
to live faithfully, to renew hope, and to share God’s love—
to proclaim the kingdom of God.
We have need of their companionship
and the encouragement we can glean from the witness of their lives,
so as to keep on moving, despite our fears,
into an expression of the grace not only that we need, but that the world needs as well.

Julia Esquivel, a Guatemalan poet, prays this way:
*Jesus said, "You ought always to pray and not to faint."
So we do not pray for easy lives;
we pray to be stronger women and men.
And we do not pray for tasks equal to our powers,
but for power equal to our tasks.
Then, the doing of our work will be no miracle –
we will be the miracle.
Every day may we wonder at ourselves
and the richness of life
which has come to us by the grace of God.
Amen.*

No flying, no invisibility.
Just the "superpower" of the Holy Spirit.
All we need is Spirit-filled, Spirit-led discipleship.
So, now, beloved people of God, hear what Jesus says:
But as for you . . . go and proclaim the kingdom of God.