

July 31, 2022
Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 13, Year C
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Hosea 11:1-11
Psalm 107:1-9, 43
Colossians 3:1-11
Luke 12:13-21

The term *Protestant monastery* probably sounds like an oxymoron to most people. Historically, there's a reason for this: during the Reformation, the founders of Protestantism disbanded the monasteries in the places where their version of Christianity took hold. Some had exited monasteries themselves: Martin Luther, whose 95 theses ignited reformist fervor, was a former monk who married a former nun.

In England, the dissolution of monasteries took place during the reign of its reforming king, Henry VIII. Remember, he was a relative late-comer to the Protestant shindig; he finally arrived primarily because he needed a divorce. The eventual result was the founding of the Church of England, with Henry as its titular head, and the tradition known as Anglicanism. British colonialism spread Anglicanism spread around the globe, including to the Americas. After the Revolutionary War, Anglicans in the new United States reorganized into what became the Episcopal Church. Note that the British monarch remains the titular head of the Church of England. Literally right now, approximately 650 Anglican bishops from around the globe, including ours, are currently in the midst of a once-in-a-decade meeting called the Lambeth Conference. That's a subject for another day.

Meanwhile, let me back up. Before the reformation, monasteries were a big deal. According to one source, "The dissolution of the monasteries in the late 1530s was one of the most revolutionary events in English history. There were nearly 900 religious houses in England ..."¹ and 2% of adult men were in religious orders.² Over the years, those monasteries had accumulated very large landholdings that were the source of very large income. Thus the ever-practical Henry's motivations for dissolution may have been more financial than theological. Throughout his lands, he seized all monastery assets and used the proceeds from land sales to fund military campaigns.

Now, fast-forward three hundred years. In the nineteenth century, a group of clerics in the Church of England began to agitate for a return to some of Anglicanism's Roman Catholic roots. The changes they initiated traveled across the Atlantic Ocean to the Episcopal Church. This is why today I wear vestments and the altar wears candles. It might not sound like a big deal. But here's what one author said about the rise of more ritualistic worship in 1850s England: "Anglo-Catholic clergy were arrested for placing candles on the altar or preaching in their surplices. People in the pews would hoot and holler in protest during Mass, sometimes even urinating in the aisles, because the choir came out in vestments."³ I thought our choir members might want to think about the next time they process into the church..

The movement that returned to Anglicanism vestments and candles also returned monasticism, even in the United States, if not in large numbers. According to the Episcopal Church website, “The Episcopal Church canonically recognizes 18 traditional orders and 14 Christian communities for men, women, or both. Religious Orders and Christian Communities serve the greater church in several ways. Many offer retreat houses and individual spiritual direction. Each community has a rule of life and is committed to prayer, life in community, and hospitality.”⁴

I’m most familiar with the Order of the Holy Cross, an order of men. They have a monastery on the west shore of the Hudson River, just north of Poughkeepsie, about a two-hour drive from here. It is a lovely place to go on retreat. The Order of the Holy Cross also has houses in Canada and South Africa, and they used to have houses in Santa Barbara and Berkeley, California. It was in Berkeley that I got to know the order. Their small house was just a few blocks from my seminary, and the brothers attended seminary events. They were readily identifiable by their head-to-toe white habits, which were slightly off-putting at first. They provided spiritual direction for many of the students, including me.

My spiritual director was Brother Lary. He was originally from Georgia, and so we shared roots in the Deep South, though his seemed much more persistent than mine. While my southern accent did not survive my transplantation up north, his accent, despite many years in Berkeley, was still as thick as peach syrup. Along with that accent came a sense of humor so dry that I was often caught flat-footed. Garbed in that otherwise intimidating white habit, he would introduce himself to new people with a hangdog smile and the words, “Hi, I’m Brother Lary. I’m a monk.” I can’t really do justice to his accent. When my parents visited for my graduation, he greeted them exactly that way, and the three of them settled in for a nice long chat.

The Order of the Holy Cross is a Benedictine Anglican Community. The brothers live according to the Rule of St. Benedict, though they have adapted it to their settings and needs. That adaptation seems reasonable, since St. Benedict wrote it way back in the year 516. The rule, besides emphasizing hospitality, includes a vow of poverty. Brother Lary taught me a lot about what it means to live such a life. Pretty much everything for those brothers was held in common. He had almost no discretionary money and owned almost no personal property. He could very occasionally acquire some slightly pricier item that he wanted or needed—but only with proper prior authorization. Mostly what he owned as that white habit.

I was then more than a little concerned about my mid-life career change. I was 41 years old and back in grad school, this time with a small child in tow and in preparation for a profession less lucrative and less secure than either of my previous two. My conversations with Brother Lary helped me to maintain some perspective on my concerns. Those concerns arose from a very deep-seated place. I was the first person in my extended family to step out of the expectations of my socioeconomic class to attend college. The determination I needed to get there and stay there stemmed primarily from a desire for economic security. By then I had witnessed the financial struggles of my older sisters. I wanted my life to be easier than theirs, but I wasn’t really looking for much more than that. My upbringing had been quite modest, in a small home with parents who lived very simply. I don’t think any of my grandparents even finished high school.

Among my college engineering cohort was Dale, the one person I knew who had a background similar to mine. Well into the program, we began to observe that our classmates' economic aspirations were much larger than ours. They would discuss what they might do to increase their future earnings, and we couldn't relate. We were relieved just to be there. One day he asked me this question: "How much money do you want to make?" By way of explaining what he getting at, he answered for himself: "I want to make enough money to be able to set my air conditioning as low as I want and not have to worry about the electric bill." I could related to that, and my reply to his question came almost instantly: "I want to make enough money to be able to go to the grocery store, buy whatever food I want, and not have to worry about the cost."

My extra education did deliver: on my first job out of college and—wonder of wonders—grad school, my starting salary was more than my father earned. We both worked for large petrochemical companies, and he'd been on the job for over thirty years. It didn't seem fair to me, and I felt a little bad about it, but he expressed nothing but pride. I can imagine that my parents felt relieved that I would not require the amount of worry they had spent on my older sisters.

As it has turned out, for my entire adult life I have in fact been able to go to the grocery store, buy whatever food I wanted, and not had to worry about the cost. I often remember that and consider myself fortunate. Even more, despite the eventual downward turn in my earning trajectory, for my entire adult life I have been able to go to almost any store, buy whatever I wanted, and not had to worry about the cost. Because I can do it, I have indulged in economic scope creep: I don't just want food. I want—and I acquire—a whole lot more than life's basic necessities. This is a privilege that I far too often take for granted.

I sometimes relativize that privilege, by observing that my wants aren't *too* extravagant. For example, I have never wanted anything like the \$500 million yacht being built for Amazon founder Jeff Bezos and for which Rotterdam has decided it will *not* dismantle a bridge.⁵ But that comparison is not one from which I should take comfort. When it comes to relativizing privilege, I ought to be looking not at those who have more, but at those who have less. It's then that I remember to look not just at the money I'm spending, but also at the money I'm *not* spending. Sure, we need to save for the future. But it is unclear to me how much savings is enough, at what point savings becomes hoarding. The temptation to over-spend and the temptation to over-save are flip sides of the same coin, and both have the potential to lead a person to evil. I fear that I have already gone there.

Thus we finally arrive at the connection to today's gospel reading from Luke. It contains one of Jesus's many warnings about greed. Whether this particular warning is good news or bad news depends perhaps on where its recipient rests on the relative economic scale. For most of *us*, I expect the news is *bad*.

Jesus was, after all, a peasant. In his particular time and place, people like him viewed the accumulation of wealth with vast suspicion. As they saw it, the economic pie was only so big, and a bigger slice for one person meant a smaller slice for another. I'm not sure whether the poor in our time and place see it any differently than that, and I wonder whether they're right. And I wonder whether, then as now, the wealthy mollified the poor with ultimately false promises of trickle-down bounty.

We should be thinking about the history of acquisition and accumulation, and about our participation in systems of acquisition and accumulation. What I have offered this morning was a part of my own ruminations about all that. The idea is that looking inward about all that helps us to look outward. After all, we need to be noticing who has been left out and left behind, and who *is going to be* left out and left behind, especially as people of color seek justice, especially as the warming planet brings havoc to the most vulnerable, especially as teens and twenty-somethings face fear and anxiety about their futures. If we do notice all that, I expect we will learn a few things about how to more fully realize God’s kingdom in their time. We might even enjoy it.

I suggested earlier that the news today for most of us is bad. But that’s not quite right, and I don’t want to leave it there. Even those of us who are relatively wealthy get some good news too. The good news is this: even we can find true security here, inside, with the God who lives inside our hearts, the same God who brings glory to the world. Finding and serving *that* master is the source of all the real wealth, all the real security, all that we will ever need. The future is not going to look like the past. May God give us the courage not only to welcome that, but also to help bring it in.

“The Country That Wants to ‘Be Average’ vs. Jeff Bezos and His \$500 Million Yacht,”

Notes

¹ G. W. Bernard, “The Dissolution of the Monasteries,” *History*, 96 (324) (October 2011): 390–409, referenced in “Dissolution of the monasteries,” Wikipedia, available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dissolution_of_the_monasteries#CITEREFBernard2011 (accessed July 31, 2022).

² Ibid.

³ Jonathan Mitchican, “Ask An Anglican: Are Crucifixes and Icons Idolatrous?” posted on the blog The Conciliar Anglican, August 12, 2015, available at <https://conciliaranglican.wordpress.com/2015/08/12/ask-an-anglican-are-crucifixes-and-icons-idolatrous/> (accessed July 31, 2022).

⁴ From the page “Religious Orders and Religious Communities” of The Episcopal Church website, available at <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/who-we-are/religious-orders-and-christian-communities/> (accessed July 31, 2022).

⁵ David Segal, “The Country That Wants to ‘Be Average’ vs. Jeff Bezos and His \$500 Million Yacht,” *The New York Times*, July 29, 2022, available online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/29/business/bezos-yacht-rotterdam.html> (accessed July 31, 2022).