

HOSEA 11:1-11 or ECCLESIASTES 1:2, 12-14; 2: 18-23

PSALM 107:1-9, 43 or PSALM 49:1-12

COLOSSIANS 3:1-11

LUKE 12:13-21

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost; Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 31, 2022; Year C

Setting Our Sights!

“Shoot low boys, they’re riding Shetland ponies,” so goes the title of a book by the late Lewis Gizzard, my favorite southern humorist and a fellow Georgian by birth. Grizzard was doing his thing long before the Blue-Collar Comedy Tour fame caught fire with comedians Bill Engvall, Jeff Foxworthy, Larry the Cable Guy, and Ron White fame! **You know when you are struggling to find a good sermon introduction when you begin with something of the likes of this!** In the same vein, I struggled mightily to find an appropriate thematic symbol, some suitable art imagery for the front cover of our Worship Folder today. You see, in Paul’s letter to the Colossians, the self-appointed apostle tells his reader then, and vicariously all of us now, that we are to have lofty aims, to be raised with Christ, an obvious Easter resurrection image, that we **“are to seek the things that are above. . . ,”** yes, to set our sights high, somewhere beyond the end of our nose, yes, reaching far beyond the narrow sightlines of our periphery vision. I am always reminded of the old Gospel Song, *Higher Ground*, when I read this text, a little old time nineteenth century American hymnody to carry Paul’s thematic theological musings. This narrative is a wonderful lection reminding us to find ways to live above our station, whatever we perceive our station in life to be. My initial idea was to put a bullseye on the cover of our Worship Folder because it follows the theme of my sermon and its title so well, **“Setting Our Sights!”** But the more I thought about it, the more I pondered, with a little help from our always helpful and friendly staff, the possibility, no, the probability, of stirring some serious backlash, clearly seeing the negative residual attached to what has painfully become an overtly suggestive, an absolutely horrific image, because of all the carnage created by the mass shootings over the last decades and especially in recent months. Yes, I quickly repented, seeing the error of my ways! Yes, the more I thought about it, the more I realized there would surely be an appropriate outcry, a visceral congregational reaction causing my best or worst homiletical efforts to backfire, pun intended, to quickly get lost in the moment. Yes, this visual was a bad idea from the start, desperately in need of something completely different. After that quick and impromptu staff powwow in the office on Monday, a much better idea emerged, a much more palatable image was found, a successful Google search saving the day and the service, the result of which is this huge, larger than life, eyeball you see looking back at you this morning. In retrospect, I guess I could have gotten away with the Target department store trademark! So much for hindsight! Even though some of our folks are hunters and despite others

of us sympathetic to hunting, I realized what a sad day it has become, this horrible nightmare we are now living, an anything but an alternative reality in which everything seems suspect. We are being dragged along for a horrific ride, forced to obsess on any and every seemingly innocuous, benign, image that has even the slightest potential to exacerbate this ongoing civic crisis. In all honesty, these images should not raise our hackles, should be harmless at face value. These images should not be offensive. They should not have the firepower to create any personal or collective crisis. But that is the reality that now quite naturally and understandably infects and prejudices our current thinking! Gun violence is our new normal, our steady and constant companion, our present lot in life! And this ubiquitous civic blight may remain a part of our culture perhaps even forever in our country, just like the scourge of COVID and all its evolving derivatives, mutations, and variances.

Despite a plethora of negative images to begin our homiletical journey this morning, I really and truly do want us to have a positive outlook, a hopeful outcome, for us to find our inner joy and to find meaningful ways to think optimistically, as we ponder Paul's goal for each and every one of us who have chosen to follow Jesus, to put on Christ in our lives as we go about our daily business, choosing to live the best of the Christian life as we perceive and interpret it. I say that in all candor because our understanding of faithful living is radically contrary to, in no way whatsoever related to or connected to all the hyper-negative nonsense associated with the suddenly acceptable and mainstream, though demonically heretical, apostate, scourge of authoritarian Christian white nationalism, a wicked evil devoid of anything remotely akin to Jesus' priorities, all his wonderful stuff. All this hysteria is being fed and fueled by rabidly zealous sectarian bigoted fundamentalists who desire a narrowly defined authoritarian government here in the land of the free and the home of the brave. And I promise at some point to pull myself out of this negative gutter and get to a higher plane as we go forward with a sermon that seems to have a mind of its own and wants to veer off course and teeter on the edge at all costs. Somewhere between the positive imagery that is our hope and the negative imagery that reveals our fear laden anxiety driving the living of these tumultuously stress-driven, anxiety-producing, days is where we usually somewhat comfortably find ourselves. After all, wherever we go, that's where we are! As with all of life, it seems we are constantly living somewhere in between, as if in a deep, dark, chasm, or a perpetually swirling vortex, an ironically permanent interim state, perpetually shifting, swinging, somewhere between the extreme polarities of the bane and blessing of our existence!

The question before us today is as pertinent now as it was on the day that it was no doubt raised by those who read Paul's not yet but soon to be codified and canonized biblical musings, "What does it mean to be raised with Christ?" "What does it mean to seek the things that are above?" As always, this is spiritual vernacular wrapped in the enigma of metaphorical mystery, symbolism on steroids, a vocabulary far beyond the pedestrian boundaries, the finite confines and limitations, of literal language. As we ponder an answer suitable to the

immediacy of our real time situations, all the scenarios that define our life and living in this present age that in so many ways all but defines us, I cannot help but be reminded during these conflicted and confounding days, a time of great upheaval and societal angst, that so much of our human being and doing seems to be scraping the bottom of the barrel. There is a plethora, a host of bottom feeders who desire to wallow in gloom and doom and constant misery, yes, those once categorically described by Hillary Clinton, all of them manifest as a “bucket of deplorables!” She nailed it and them! Why go low when it is just as easy, as effortless, and certainly better in the short and long run, to go high, yes, to aim high? Many long for easy ways out, taking the simpler paths of least resistance because of a hyper-demand for comfort and ease, specifically in terms of faith, a faux attempt to follow Jesus. All these longings motivated because of the fears and anxieties that drive our survival instincts, our need to circle our own wagons, protecting tribe and clan at all costs. **Our overall culture has indeed become a “me” driven society, obsessively given over to our wants and needs! Yes, circumstances, consider say inflation, a pandemic, political unrest for a few notable examples, alone or especially all combined, can and will do that, exacerbating that dangerous dynamic!** So many these days seem to operate out of their gullibility, their insecurities and obsessions, and yes, out of abject paranoia, the blight of conspiratorial nonsense, perverse thinking now acceptable as mainstream, common place, yes, part and parcel of what is called the new normal. There should be nothing ordinary, nothing routine about this kind of crazy, this level of psychoses. Even the wildest, most outlandish, notions, take cannibalism for example, gain traction as they are spread like wildfire through all the courses of social media. Even the weirdest conspiracy theories are believed by at least more than a few of those whose lives obviously are lacking and demand a certain level of drama because they desperately need to get a life. Why is it easier, more expedient, to believe fantasy more than fact? Inquiring minds want to know the answer to that sobering question! So many today seem to be looking for the least common denominator to guide their shallow lives, the lowest baseline adopted as their standard of living, as their paltry line in the sand, their not-so-golden rule, yes, to use a biblical image, their plumb line, folks who have little or no imagination, are not in the least bit intellectually curious, and certainly devoid of any modicum of critical thinking skills. Their lives are either lived only in the moment or vicariously through the adventures of others as they go about their unfulfilling menial existence day after day after day. While living in the moment does indeed convey an endearing idea that has much to offer, very positive imagery, it can also carry a very dangerous and counter intuitive tendency, negatively influencing any significant or tangible effort to look ahead, always out in front of us, to visualize and yes, seek to build a bright future, all combined fulfilling our Christian calling, our duty to envision and enable, embolden and empower, the great hope of the advent of God’s realm come on earth as it is in the eternity of the heavenly places, a desire that is always out there, beyond our grasp, a worthy goal to be diligently, passionately, zealously, sought.

A healthy approach to living always requires a comprehensive, integrated, understanding of the past, learning from its mistakes, while not wallowing in the nostalgia, a Camelot mythology

warped by rose colored glasses peering into unrealistically altered rearview mirrors. A healthy approach to living does, however, demand seizing every moment with excitement and anticipation, being still and knowing, smelling the coffee or the roses or whatever imagery gives you meaning, fulfillment, and pleasure. It means taking and observing whatever constitutes Sabbath in your life, getting in touch with our contemplative side, our reflective qualities, the full capacity of our intuitive “be still and know” sensory awareness. It means that a major challenge is found in avoiding in and as much as is humanly possible, becoming stuck in ways that subtly and temptingly persuade us to wallow in whatever capacities seek to debilitate us and diminish our humanity. Life is always moving forward, an object in motion staying in motion. Finally, a healthy approach to living implores us to look always look ahead, to the days, weeks, months, and years, even decades and centuries, galvanized as one, all unified in purpose as one race. Envisioned as a beautiful tapestry woven together, a spectrum of humanity reflecting the colors of the rainbow. All assembled as one worldwide beloved faith community, we joyfully seek and strive to build a bright and prosperous future on this earth, to prepare a place that will be a wonderful habitation for everyone who follows in our humble and otherwise footsteps, a utopia on this planet, a global village, that at least minimally in some way reflects the very realm of God right here and right now. As the prophet Isaiah once promised those who were in bondage, captive to their Babylonian indenture, a new day was coming. It is a reminder that a new day is always coming, is always on the horizon. We can either dread its arrival or we can greet it like the glorious dawn of a new day, filled with joyful anticipation and expectation. Yes, our perspective, our outlook, our attitude, is essential in the myriad ways we look at every aspect of living, past, present, and future.

Paul begins our congregational conversation by suggesting that “if” we are raised with Christ, and then proceeds to elaborate on just what that means. I am assuming a might big “if” here! When Paul calls his readers to be raised with Christ and to seek the things that are above, the apostle was imploring them, and now urging all of us, to live life to its fullest, to squeeze every ounce of energy from all our existential realities, all our experiences, alone and combined. We are to seek a better way, a different way, a more fulfilling and productive, yes, positive, way, a way that leads to life at its fullest in the right here and now and yes, mystically fulfilled later, in the eternity of God presence we are already living. In this part of Paul’s letter to the Colossians, he also reminds his reader of the things that debilitate, that diminish, that can stifle, stagnate, or suffocate, that threaten to destroy our humanity, any and everything that has the capacity to quench our spirits and squash our souls. We will not mention them again or dwell on them—Bernie has done a fine job of calling them out to us—but Paul has named them and so on occasion so must we. Yes, they can wait for another day! It is my hunch that all of us grew up learning this and other laundry lists of sins and we do not need the painful, poignant, reminder. Paul ends with another rousingly inclusive salvo, declaring to one and all, “In that renewal,” that is, in the shedding of old bad habits and in putting on the symbolically stylish clothes befitting our new selves, selves that are always being remade and remolded,

refreshed and renewed, restored and reformed, yes, resurrected, “In that renewal, there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, enslaved and free, but Christ is all and in all!” The secret to our prosperous living is truly found in that last profound phrase, “. . . but Christ is all and in all!” When we tap into the Spirit within, when we encounter and engage that internal spark of divine creation inherent within every human being created in the divine image, and that always includes every human being, we find a loving and gracious peace, far beyond our finite comprehension, our limited understanding, a contentment and tranquility, yes, mercy and a much needed resolve, to not only withstand what Shakespeare poetically called “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,” every detour this life can throw our way, not merely surviving until we are rescued from this life and this world, but we can thrive, we can become the best we can be, we can be all that we can be, we can live life fully to overflowing, no matter, yes, living lives that matter! No, these promises do not mean a life devoid of hardship, the snares of catastrophe and disease, that we are magically protected or exempt from, are absolved of obstacles and troubles, that life will always be on the sunny side, including that huge bowl of those proverbial cherries. We do not get a pass as people of faith! Yet, in the big scheme of things, when all things are considered, at the end of the day and in the final analysis, we know that all is good, no very good, all is well because God promised, God said so! It is a matter of trust, every time, all the time! We “stand amazed” in holy presence, to invoke another Gospel Song image for good measure! We are indebted for the experience, thankful for the journey, grateful for the adventure. We cannot help but be filled with gratitude, praising the great Spirit of the universe for all life’s mysteries, filled with cups overflowing with generosity because of every breath we are privileged to take, yes, even as it all evens out in our human being and doing, yes, even when juxtaposed to the bad and ugly that sometimes threatens to hide the good we all know is always lurking in there somewhere.

In today’s Witness from the Gospels in Luke, someone in the crowd begs of Jesus to handle some family matters, to mind someone else’s business while getting up in their business. Oh, what a mistake this self-absorbed, self-centered, narcissistically infused, request turned out to be! I have already alluded in detail this kind of person! Jesus, without missing a beat, then tells a story, another parable no doubt pulled from his treasure trove of at the ready tales, object lessons used to make his most salient points. You know the story well. A man had a bumper crop of produce and realized that he could not fit it all the proceeds into his miniscule barn. What to do? What to do? The solution was simple. Rather than share his bounty with all his neighbors, needy and not, he would build a bigger barn to store his ample harvest. Now folks, I must tell you that this story stings a bit because I have a rather large storage unit for my worldly goods, and it bothers me to think I might indeed resemble this remark. But I digress; I often do! Yes, the difference between being a hoarder and a collector is probably one degree of separation, a matter of opinion and perspective, the difference simply being held in the eye of the beholder! Yes, as fate would have it, right after completing this massive building project, this foolish fool,

while extremely satisfied and piously and profoundly proud in every way, looks upon his accomplishment and muses that he is now set for many enjoyable, labor less years and can thus take his leisure, partying every day, eating, drinking, and making merry! Not! For as fate would have it, he drops dead on the spot, DRT, dead right there! Yes, somebody else would gladly get to enjoy the fruit of his labors. We get the point!

But there is another point that I want us to get, and it begins and ends with the deeply out of touch idiot who wanted Jesus to be arbiter for his dysfunctional family systems nightmare, oddly thinking that in some way, perhaps in an alternative universe, this might somehow be something to which Jesus would dare address. Recalling and imaging Paul's earlier pronouncements today, keeping them in mind here, it was as if Jesus was trying to tell this man and anyone else who would listen, that there is so much more to life than our oft pedestrian irritants, the trivial concerns blinding our immediate radar. Yes, in that moment, at least to one stressed and agitated self-consumed soul, inheritance seemed to be the one and only priority, the primary, most important thing to consider. But alas it was not, not in that moment and certainly was not something to which Jesus should have ever needed to be of concern, nor a matter to which the rabbi even needed to be made aware, a complete and total waste of his time. He should not have been put in the awkward position of potential arbiter! In that moment, that teachable, "preachable," moment, there were other considerations much more pressing, much higher on the priority list. Here Jesus was teaching the ways and means to a better life, trying to convey the keys of what it means to live in God's realm, even to live God's realm, on earth, yes, as it eternally is in the heavenly places. Jesus was calling one and all to discipleship, words of life that are indeed, life altering, life changing. And all this dolt wanted from the rabbi, all he wanted him to do was for him to take a detour, to go off script, to stop smack dab in the middle of his lesson and give some one on one, some inappropriate undivided attention, squandering an opportunity for the granting of a gracious gift to be freely given. Please, right now, stop what you are doing for the group, forget their needs, and settle my internal family squabble, a dispute that certainly, surely, belonged to someone somewhere elsewhere! Really! Seriously! As the articulate preacher in Ecclesiastes astutely observed, there is a time! The writer of this epic book of biblical proportions then waxes eloquent with a list outlining the polarities that make clear his profound points. Yes, the same writer who fatalistically declares that all is vanity, boldly declares that "For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill and a time to heal; a time to break down and a time to build up; a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance; a time to throw away stones and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek and a time to lose; a time to keep and a time to throw away; a time to tear and a time to sew; a time to keep silent and a time to speak; a time to love and a time to hate; a time for war and a time for peace." Yes, and there is a time to live as if we really believe we have been raised with Christ, a time to seek the things that are above, and yes, those special times are always and always

now! We should live like it! Our lives should reflect the reality of resurrection in all its myriad and wonderful forms. I would suggest that there is a time for Kairos, God's time, and it is all the time, every time. And yes, there is a time for Chronos, our time, the clocks and calendars that order our lives, yet always appropriately overshadowed and overwhelmed, delightfully so, by God's serendipitous timing for each and every one of us and our world. Yes, there is a time for this and a time for that and knowing the difference makes all the difference. Remember the story about Mary and Martha, Martha and Mary! Both knew, or assumed to know, their priorities, but only one intuitively, fully, and in all honesty, understood completely, beyond a shadow of all doubt exactly which authentically, genuinely, yes, essentially, constituted the better thing, the only thing that mattered in that sacred space and time, the very thing that would not be taken away from her under any cause, any circumstances.

Folks, as followers of Jesus, disciples in every way, it is true that in many ways when we sign up with Jesus we are indeed living as if in an alternative universe, at least to some degree, and that is the way it should be. We believe that we are playing for something different, something better, something grander and greater, something that is literally other worldly, out of this world, but, ironically perhaps, indeed our feet still firmly planted in this world where they desperately belong, where we presently live and move and have our being. After all, those who are heavenly minded tend to be of no earthly good! That is not the image Paul sought to portray when he tells us to be raised with Christ, to seek the things that are above! Don't be silly! Our priorities are uniquely fashioned, often counter intuitive, counter cultural, yes, once again, different, because we do indeed march to a different drumbeat, hearing a different sound, a cacophony of voices echoing a great refrain, the great cloud of witnesses as they cheer us on to new and never before scaled heights, yes, the rarified air of places unknown, the saints that Baptist theologian Carlyle Marney once called the "balcony people." They are a choir that is billions strong, voicing an echo of the ages reminding us that we are already a part of a ginormous, colossal, eternal gathering of those who have sought to follow in the very large footprints of Jesus, each step blessed and galvanized by the faith once given by the martyrs who forged, formed, and framed the early Church, a rich legacy they secured from a firm foundation, a solid cornerstone that is a most coveted and covenanted commodity, now bequeathed as our sacred inheritance, an heirloom that is our precious responsibility. **We owe it to them because we are accountable to them and to God, and we owe it to those who will come after us, those who will follow, tracing our footsteps as they create their own. As they are guided by our pathways, we covenant with God and neighbor and self to model, sustain, and nurture a graciously loving faith, full of peace and mercy, always "extravagantly welcoming," expansively inclusive, radically hospitable, and vulnerably open, just the way Jesus envisioned it, created and modeled it, making it come to pass, bringing it to fruition and full flower. It means being attentive to the social justice needs of the world, lending a helping hand to those who live on the fringes of society, those who unfortunately find themselves on the margins, the dispossessed and disenfranchised whose lives reveal a most unfortunate incompleteness**

and/or lack of wholeness, living anything but holistically fulfilling and rewarding lives. Our goal is not just to enable, but to embolden, to empower, them to lives far more fulfilling than simply living a bland existence that merely goes through the motions. When we do these sacred things, fulfilling our high calling, taking up our cross by taking up their cause, embodying what are indeed the holiest of acts, yes, revealing the very essence of holiness and Godliness in every way imaginable. It means doing something to make a difference, accomplishing something, something positive, helpful, productive, no matter how menial or trivial it may seem, making a beneficial contribution to society, to the world at large, no matter how local, how small or insignificant it may appear! Just do something! Then, and only then, have we shown ourselves to be approved, as the biblical writer elsewhere describes it, raised with Christ, to be authentically, genuinely, with all the integrity we can muster in our human being and doing, to show ourselves worthy even in our perceived unworthiness, rightly dividing the word of truth, setting our minds on Christ and on the things that are above, our risen lives reflecting and revealing that indeed we are giving all we've got, our best effort, living on a higher plane, higher ground indeed! Yes, there is a Gospel Song by that very title coming later this morning!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and longs for us to be raised with Christ, children of resurrection, seeking the things that are above, wherever Christ resides in the heavenly places. Amen and amen.