

## “When God Comes Near”

July 8, 2007  
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Luke 10:1-11

When you were getting ready to come to church this morning, doing your hair and nails and brushing your teeth (that’s just what the guys do, I don’t know what you women do), did you think to yourself, “I just can’t wait to get there to meet the living Christ!” I wonder if we asked for a show of hands how many of you would have thought about that as you got ready to come to church today.

A few days ago when Rick McKee gave his concert he mentioned the list that his grandfather Dick had given to him—a list of his favorite songs that he wanted Rick to play and sing. I don’t know if this song was on the list, but it would be a good one to add to the list. How many of you remember the song, *The Nearness of You*? I can’t remember who first sang this song. It was one of those songs where the song was more popular than the one who sang the song. I heard Nora Jones sing that song a couple of years ago at a concert. She walked out on the stage and sat down at the piano in front of all these people. There was no backup band or anything else. She just played this song and sang it: *The Nearness of You*. The first line of the song goes something like this: “It’s not the pale moon that excites me, that thrills and delights me, oh no, it’s just the nearness of you.”

You remember the old saying that goes something like this: “Close only counts in horseshoes.” A couple of wise guys added some other things, like hand grenades and ballroom dancing. Close counts more than anything else in our relationship with God.

Our gospel lesson today is about closeness, about God coming close to us. I know each of you could come up here and tell about a time when you

Good News this morning is that you have heard this greatest of news—God is near to us. What this scripture says is that God reaches out to us. There is something about the nature of God, it seems that God is lonely for us. It seems that God will use even other people to reach out to us because we have that emptiness in our lives when God is not near.

If you come into my office you will notice a beautiful plant in my window. Someone gave that plant to me, I don't know who it was. I'm not the most observant person in the world. For the first three or four days I didn't notice the plant was there, but when I did, it didn't look too good. Someone told me it is a Peace Lily. I don't know a Peace Lily from a War Willy, but this Peace Lily was looking pretty sad. It should be called a Camel Lily. I started watering that plant and I watered it and watered it. If I miss even a day, it is in the heat of the sun, the leaves start drooping. I believe we are like that Peace Lily. As followers of Christ we are thirsty for living water, the kind of thirst that can only be quenched by living water. It's caused by that emptiness in our lives when we are either unaware or edged God out of our lives and we don't realize that God is near to us.

The Good News of the Gospel is this: God has chosen us to reach out to others, to share the Good News that God is near to us. It's *when* God comes near, not if or will, but God does come near to us. That's the message we are called to share this day.

This is the story of the very beginning of the church. There were some stops and starts and hits and misses, successes and failures, just like today. There were times, I'm sure, when that early church gathered and not everyone was present. I've heard this: the tragedy of the church is not empty pews but empty people in the pews. I think what this means is that people come to worship who are hungry and thirsty for God and nothing happens in church that day. They leave worship just as empty, not having realized that God has come

near.

This morning know this, God has come near to us this day. The living Christ calls, pleads, and challenges us to share this good news. How long has it been since you invited another person to come into the presence of God? You might try this. If nothing else works, try this. I know you have a story to tell about when God was near in your life, but if you are embarrassed to tell that story try this. “We have a new minister. Come and hear our new minister. He has a sense of humor, he’s interesting, intelligent, handsome.” (Aren’t you glad we believe in a loving and forgiving God who believes us even when we lie?). I don’t want you to say a word about me. What I want you to say is this, “Come to church with me and come into the presence of the living Christ.” If that’s all you say, it’s a start. Amen.

*practical* atheist. In other words, he has no place for God in his life. His faith makes no difference in his life, and above all should not our faith make a difference in our lives? What’s wrong in the story is that the man has left God out of all of his plans, and he has not been open to God’s plans for his own life.

One of my favorite scriptures from the Old Testament applies to this story. It is a scripture that you’ve heard before. In some versions you might not recognize it. In some versions of the scripture, more modern versions, the scripture reads, “Where there is no prophecy, the people cast off restraint.” In other words, where there is no mention of God, there is no discipline in the people’s lives. But we know the scripture more often as this: “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” Where there is no vision, the people perish, and it’s not just *no* vision. Sometimes it can be the wrong vision, a competing vision, a distorted vision. In this story, all this man could think about was building more barns. If you think about it, that might be all he does. He builds so many barns that he doesn’t have any room for his crops. That seems foolish to us, but how many of us do similar things?

I have waited for several weeks to mention this to you. Do you remember all of the stories about Miss Belvedere, that old ’57 Plymouth they buried 50 years ago? Ever since I first started reading about that, I couldn’t wait to share this with you. What they did wrong was this: at the unveiling of Miss

Belvedere, someone should have read the scripture when Jesus said, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and *rust* consume." People came from all over the country. People came from Europe. It was their vision to come see an old rust bucket. Miss Belvedere is a metaphor for much of what is wrong in our society. If we just save enough.... If we just hoard enough....

I had an uncle one time. He was married to my mother's sister. He had big plans. They had four children. As you can imagine, it was not easy to provide for those children, but he said he was going to be a good provider, a good husband, a good father, and he was going to be a millionaire by the time he was 40. I think he made it. I'm not sure because I lost touch with my uncle, because my aunt and my cousins lost touch with my uncle. My aunt left my uncle because she was convinced that he cared more about being a millionaire than he cared about her and their children.

It's easy to see this in the man in our story and perhaps easy to see it in my uncle, but it's not so easy to see it in ourselves, is it? Let me share this story with you. When we moved from Ponca City to Wichita Falls, as you might imagine, we had accumulated several things, so many things that when we got into our house in Wichita Falls we didn't have room for everything, so we bought a storage shed. Do any of you have a storage shed? It's like building more and more barns. We filled up that storage shed with stuff. Then when we moved from Wichita Falls to Woodward, the house that we bought at Woodward had a basement. All of the stuff that was in the storage shed went to the basement in the house at Woodward. While we were there, we bought another house in Woodward that we remodeled, and you're going to love this if you have a lot of stuff, this garage was two cars deep and three cars wide. You could get five cars in that garage, literally. We had all kinds of room to store our stuff.

The problem was this: the basement in the first house leaked, and most of the stuff we had had gotten moldy. But, you know what? We moved it anyway. But when we moved here, we decided we're going to get rid of some of this old moldy stuff. There was a company in Woodward that would bring a dumpster and leave it in your driveway. We started getting stuff out of the attic and garage, and we filled up the dumpster with stuff. We called the company and they brought another dumpster, and we filled up that dumpster with stuff - stuff that we had just hoarded; stuff that was useless.

It seems that some people's only vision is the vision they see in the mir-

ror. That's as large as their world is, is what happens and how it affects them. I hesitate to say this at this time of year: I love football as much as anyone, but if football is your vision in life, you're missing something in your faith. I'm going to go watch those guys practice at the PGA. Can you imagine anything sillier than that? Getting out there in the heat, not even to see the tournament, but just to see them practice. If that's your vision in life, your faith is missing something.

What is your vision? What is the controlling vision of your life? What is it that is most important to you? Before you answer, let me remind you of something else that you already know. Remember the name Mike Coolbaugh, the first base coach for the Tulsa Drillers? I doubt very seriously when he packed his suitcase to go to that game at Little Rock that he realized it would be the last time he would ever see his wife and children. This story reminds us that our days are limited.

This past week when some of those folks in Minneapolis crossed that bridge I doubt very seriously if they thought it was the last time they were going to see their loved ones, but for some of them, it was. What is your vision in life? What is it that is most important to you?

The negative way to say this is to say that life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. The positive way to say this is to say we discover true joy when God is the vision of our lives. Jesus called it being rich toward God. I'm not sure exactly what it means, but at least a part of what Jesus meant when he said it was this: It has something to do with loving God with all of the heart and soul and mind and strength, and it has something to do with loving one's neighbor as one's self. It means that you understand when God is the controlling vision of your life, all of the other things seem to be in order.

In a few moments we're going to sing this wonderful hymn:

“Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart;  
Naught be all else to me, save that thou art...  
Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,  
Still be my vision, O Ruler of all.”

May it be so for each of us, this day and always. Amen