

Order of Worship for August 16, 2020
Profiles in Faith: Lowell Gess and Nyamah Dunbar

COUNTDOWN

OPENING VERSE

Annette (or Jim) Brandner
Philippians 4:19-20 (CEB)

My God will meet your every need out of his riches in the glory that is found in Christ Jesus.
Let glory be given to God our Father forever and always. Amen.

PRELUDE

Jesus Shall Reign
by James Mansfield
Diane Gronewold on Organ

GREETING

Rachael

OPENING PRAYER

God of the Ages, we praise you in a chorus with all those people of faith who have come before us. We praise you with all those around the world who pray to you right now. And we praise you with the generations to come. May your people everywhere praise your holy name, and may we be inspired to love and serve you wherever we are. Amen.

HYMN

This is My Father's World
Maltbie Babcock and Franklin Sheppard

This is my Father's world and to my listening ears
All nature sings and round me rings the music of the spheres

This is my Father's world, I rest thee in the thought
Of rocks and trees, of skies and seas
His hands the wonders wrought

This is my Father's world, O let me never forget
That though the wrong seems oft so strong God is the ruler yet

This is my Father's world, why should my heart be sad
The Lord is king let the heavens ring, God reigns let the earth be glad

VIDEO 1: Lowell Gess

OFFERING and PRAYER

****General Fund, Good Samaritan Fund, Building Fund****

OFFERTORY

The Kingdom of the Lord is Here

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Verse 1

The kingdom of the Lord is here
Come gather, all from far and near
Awake your mind and have no fear
God's arms are opened wide

No armored guards protect its gates
No tangled chains or judgement weights
Just free your blessed heart from hate
And human, come inside

Verse 2

Here enemies stand side by side
By truth and justice unified
It's growing where the old one died
Where any wound is healed

Here earthly cries are not ignored
It blooms and lives forevermore
In places that our hands restored
By selfless love revealed

Verse 3

Where kindness overcomes the mean
Where love is like the morning's gleam
And peace an ever-flowing stream
The kingdom lives today

Where love and understanding's learned
Where prejudice is left to burn
Oppression's tables overturned
O God, show us the way

Verse 4

Your kingdom come, your will be done
May we sustain what you've begun
'Til all creation is made one
O Jesus, lead us on

The kingdom of the Lord is here
The evening clouds begin to clear
The morning sun is drawing near
Come and reveal the dawn

VIDEO 2: Nyamah Dunbar

SCRIPTURE

Luke 12:13-21 (CEB)

13 Someone from the crowd said to Jesus,
"Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me."

14 Jesus said to him, "Man, who appointed me as judge or referee between you and your brother?"

15 Then Jesus said to them, "Watch out! Guard yourself against all kinds of greed. After all, one's life isn't determined by one's possessions, even when someone is very wealthy." 16 Then he told them a parable: "A certain rich man's land produced a bountiful crop. 17 He said to himself, What will I do? I have no place to store my harvest! 18 Then he thought, Here's what I'll do. I'll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. That's where I'll store all my grain and goods. 19 I'll say to myself, You have stored up plenty of goods, enough for several years. Take it easy! Eat, drink, and enjoy yourself. 20 But God said to him, 'Fool, tonight you will die. Now who will get the things you have prepared for yourself?' 21 This is the way it will be for those who hoard things for themselves and aren't rich toward God."

VIDEO: Annette Brandner (*maybe Annette can talk about her work on school uniforms for students in West Africa, also plug the scholarships she wants to support for Ann Carlson? And, of course, how her faith is the foundation of this work for her...*)

SERMON

Profiles in Faith: Dr. Lowell Gess and Nyamah Dunbar

If there is anything 2020 has taught us, it's that you can never be too prepared. Disaster can strike at any moment. Life can change in an instant. So much is out of our control. This year is enough to send even the most live-in-the-moment, fly-by-the-seat-of-our-pants, spontaneous folks among us into anxiety about what the future holds.

What would you stock in your bunker, if you were preparing to ride out a long season of uncertainty underground? Books? Beans? Water? Puzzles? Coffee? Money? A favorite blanket? What could you not live without in the future? What treasures are most important to you? What are you saving for a special occasion or a rainy day?

The character Jesus describes in the parable we heard today would've been ready for 2020. He had more than enough to last him a lifetime and then some. He's had a successful farming business, and rather than squander his wealth on all kinds of excess, he stores it up in barns, saving for the future. And then, when those barns are full he plans to tear them down and build bigger barns. He will always have enough, and more than enough, no matter what unforeseen circumstances might arise. It's a genius plan, really, and it's exactly what every financial advisor in our present day context would tell us to do. Save, save, save. Invest in the future - in your future. Plan ahead. Contribute the maximum to your long-term retirement funds. Diversify your holdings (use lots of different barns) so that if something goes wrong with one of them you'll have other resources to fall back on. If you start now, you'll be set for the rest of your life and you can spend your retirement years eating and drinking and being merry, as that old farmer in Jesus' story had set himself up to do.

And the first challenge for us is this - we don't live in the kind of economy where most people have any extra resources to put away for retirement. The average family in our country is one unexpected event away from complete financial disaster. And that's not even diving into the

complexities of poverty, the gig economy and how hard it is to find full time employment right now, or the extreme disparities that exist where a very few people have REALLY BIG barns and most everyone else has a few pennies in a coffee can.

Where is the justice in building bigger and bigger barns while our neighbors starve?

Jesus calls the farmer a fool. Well, in his story he lets God call the farmer a fool. And, if you're one of those folks who works A LOT and VERY HARD to make a life for yourself and for the people you love, then I imagine that you feel the sting of that harsh comment. Fool? A fool? For working hard and earning well and saving up for a rainy day? A fool for wanting to live the good life after years of laboring in the fields? That seems so unnecessary, Jesus.

But scholar Elizabeth Johnson points out in her reading of this parable that:

The rich farmer is a fool not because he is wealthy or because he saves for the future, but because he appears to live only for himself, and because he believes that he can secure his life with his abundant possessions.

She points out that:

When the rich man talks in this parable, he talks only to himself, and the only person he refers to is himself: "What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?" "I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry'" (Luke 12:17-19).

She concludes:

The rich man's land has produced abundantly, yet he expresses no sense of gratitude to God or to the workers who have helped him plant and harvest this bumper crop. He has more grain and goods in storage than he could ever hope to use, yet seems to have no thought of sharing it with others, and no thought of what God might require of him. He is blind to the fact that his life is not his own to secure, that his life belongs to God, and that God can demand it back at any time.

And there it is: the one circumstance he could not prepare for enough to survive it - his own death. And you can't take it with you, as they say.

Of course, we are concerned about the future for ourselves and for the people closest to us. But perhaps, we too sometimes buy into the idea that having more money and more stuff will ensure us a long life and great joy and satisfaction. But that's unlikely, according to Jesus. And we know, all too well, how painfully right he is. We know that no amount of wealth or privilege or power, no matter how big someone's barns, human beings are finite and pretty fragile creatures. Unfortunately in the current landscape, wealth does create unjust gaps in access to adequate healthcare, sanitation, and community resources. But all the wealth in the world does not prevent someone from being diagnosed with a terrible disease or from having a tragic accident.

Wealth does not make families immune to falling apart or make us better at having meaningful relationships with other people (as evidenced in part by the fight over an inheritance that led Jesus to tell this story in the first place).

And the biggest reminder: wealth does not draw us any nearer to God. Scripture tells us over and over again quite the opposite. God sees the poor and those who suffer and struggle. And we see God most clearly when we empty ourselves, not when we fill barn after barn after barn.

Still, we know that Jesus also spent time eating and drinking, traveling, enjoying other people. It's not an either/or proposition when it comes to what we earn and what we do with it. It's more a matter of priorities. Will we invest our lives and our resources into the kingdom of God or into our own self-interest?

Today we again heard several profiles in faith, with two common themes. First, each of these ordinary-turned-extraordinary people share a passion for a specific geographical region, one that I also have personal affection for: West Africa. Second, each of these people - these Methodists - have faced critical moments in their lives when they chose to empty out their barns for others, rather than build bigger barns for themselves.

Also, and this is the really fun part for me, this week we shared profiles of 3 people I personally know, admire, and love.

You heard their beautiful stories in this morning's video segments, and you got to hear from each of them in their own words about their work, their faith, and their trust in God. So, I won't re-narrate all the details now. But let me simply highlight something especially inspiring about each of them.

Dr. Lowell Gess was a medical doctor working in Sierra Leone. When he discovered that the real, pressing need there was for eye care in the country, what did he do? He went back to school - he emptied himself of ego and time and study and financial resources to get the training that would most benefit the people he knew God had called him to serve. And then, he spent his life serving and pouring his resources not into a barn for himself, but into the training and equipping of so many people to carry the work forward. In his nineties he returned to Sierra Leone in the middle of the Ebola crisis because he was more than willing to risk his own life, which had been long and full, if it meant keeping other young promising medical professionals safe from the terrible disease. Oh, and he's also a Methodist, with clergy credentials!

Nyamah Dunbar, a young and dynamic Liberian Methodist, has spent her entire adult life in service to the world and to the church. Now, her new adventure in agriculture is not about storing up great wealth for herself, but rather about how she can invest her tremendous gifts for leadership into a system built by Liberians for Liberians that will have a significant impact upon food supplies, economy, and sustainability for so many people. Her experience of being called

by God to stay in Liberia during the Ebola crisis is a reminder that our presence is itself one of the gifts that we can offer to one another.

And Annette Brandner. Raise your hand if you have ever been helped or blessed by Annette and Jim! Okay, I can't see you, but I know that there are a LOT of you out there raising your hands. Annette gets things done, and what I want most to highlight about Annette as a profile in faith is that she is the most self-emptying person I have ever had the privilege to know in my entire life. And I've known some really phenomenal people. Annette inspires me, and I think all of us together at UMCA, to stop making excuses about how I can't help someone or bless someone today and to instead roll up my sleeves and figure out what I can offer. We are not only blessed because Annette serves so many of us, but also because she inspires us to what a life of service really looks like, and she does it all with a smile and a reminder that her love for us is an extension of God's own selfless love.

Thanks be to God for these people, for these stories. May we be inspired to build a world together where we can all eat, drink, and be merry together because we have embraced God's kingdom and all God's people with self-emptying love.

Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

THE LORD'S PRAYER

HYMN

Sent Out in Jesus' Name

Sent out in Jesus' name, our hands are ready now
to make the world the place in which the kingdom comes.

The angels cannot change a world of hurt and pain
into a world of love, of justice, and of peace.

The task is ours to do to set it really free.

O help us to obey and carry out your will!

BENEDICTION

POSTLUDE

Toccata by Gene Clark

Diane on Organ