

“The To-Do List”
Luke 21:5-19
November 13, 2016
The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings
Our “to-do” list is not just we we want, but what God wants us to do

So here we are. Last week I asked you what you were going to do when you woke up on Wednesday morning. Well, how did you feel when you woke up on Wednesday and the election was over? Some of us felt elated, some of us were devastated. Some were relieved, some were angered, pretty much all of us were surprised. But we said last week that no matter how we felt, that as Christians, what we do hasn't changed. What we do on Wednesday is the same as what we do on Tuesday and today.

I recently watched a TED talk by Candy Chang. Do you know TED talks? TED stands for Technology, Entertainment and Design and for years they've been having conferences to talk about ideas that shape our lives and shape society. They started inviting people to give short talks about Ideas Worth Sharing. Several years ago we talked about one in this church that Karen Armstrong gave called Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life. We even had an adult class on it. Candy Chang is what we might call a community artist. She is an artist...and a designer...and an urban planner. She takes all these varied skills and uses them to offer gifts to her community, to invite her community to understand, refine, and claim their identity more fully. In this sense, then, she is an artist *for* her community, a public artist devoted to the welfare of her neighborhood.

Because of these commitments, she has launched several projects that are at once ingenious, simple, and inspiring, each involving some of the abandoned buildings of her home city, New Orleans. One such project included putting name tags on the front of an abandoned store front; but instead of reading “Hello, my name is...”, these nametags read, “I wish this was...” and invited passers-by to share their dreams for this vacant shop. At the site of another abandoned building, that I gather had some neighborhood or historic significance, she erected spaces on which people could write some of their memories of the building and what took place there. Rather than remaining only a decrepit abandoned lot, the building front became a testimony, even a memorial, to all the small and grand things that had

happened in its premises.

In her most recent project – inspired by the loss of a dear friend – she placed on the side of an abandoned and vacant home large chalkboards stenciled with the words, “Before I die I want to...” and invited her neighbors to share some of their hopes and dreams for their lives. The invitation was eagerly accepted – first in New Orleans and then around the world – and what people shared was moving, poignant, humorous, and all so human.¹ People wrote all kinds of things. Before I die, I want to . . . write a novel, see Italy, own a boat, swim without holding my nose, be the one that she believes me to be. Wonderful, funny, poignant things. What would you write? Before I die I want to . . . What would you say? Before I die I want to go camping with my grandchildren. Visit Tierra Del Fuego at the tip of South America. Be helpful in fighting climate change. Watch the Cubs win the World Series. Oh wait, I've done that one already! But the others are things that I might write. Sort of an ultimate to-do list. Thinking about one's own death and how much time we might have tends to focus our thoughts. What might you write?

During Luke's time, I'm sure people were thinking along these lines and Luke is trying to encourage them. He remembers Jesus talking about the destruction of the Temple and all the difficulty the Jewish people went through being persecuted by the Romans. By the time Luke is writing this story down, the Temple has been destroyed for 20 years and now much of the Roman persecution has turned to the Christians instead of the Jews. And the temptation must have been for Luke's community to run and hide. But he is trying to tell them to not worry about it, that the Spirit will take care of whatever might happen to them. They should remember the promises that God gives to Israel through the prophet Isaiah. The future is in God's hands. In the meantime they should live their lives. They should take care of the things that are on their “to-do” lists. What's on yours?

What's on the list for our church? If we were to put up a chalkboard that said, “I would like to see our

¹ Lose, David J. “In the Meantime . . .” November 6, 2013

church . . .” what would you write on it? What's on our “to-do” list? If we are to take Luke's words seriously that the future, no matter how bleak it may look at times, is in God's hands, if we were confident about that, what would we say about our future? What do we want to do?

This is Stewardship Dedication Sunday, and let me say that we will soon be dedicating our pledges to the use of the Church for God's glory. But our to-do list should not be about this (hold up pledge card). These are simply a reflection of something else. They are a reflection of our conviction that we belong, not to ourselves, but as the old catechism says, we belong, body and soul, in life and in death, to our faithful Lord Jesus Christ who loved us and gave himself for us. That's where we begin. And because all that we have and all that we are belong to Christ and are given to us as his stewards, we return to him what belongs to him anyway: ourselves, our time and effort, our treasure, our love and loyalty. And then instead of asking “What do we want our church to do?” we ask something different. Because we might answer differently if we asked what do we want the church to do. We want it to entertain us. We want to grow. We want to be influential. We want to be comforted. We want our children to be educated. We want to have a beautiful, well-maintained, historic building. We want to be secure. Those are all good things. I hope we have those.

But if we belong, not to ourselves, but to our Savior, shouldn't our question be, “What does God want us to do?” What's on his list? Be successful or be faithful? Educate our children, or everyone learn? Have a beautiful building or a place of welcome? Be comforted or be caring? Or maybe St. Paul gives us a to do list: Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil

for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. That's from Romans, Chapter 12. Quite a to-do list. To even make a start on those things, it's going to take all of us. That's our to-do list, no matter who is president. That's how we get closer, day by day, to Isaiah's vision of God city as a joy and God's people a delight, where the wolf and the lamb shall feed together and no one shall hurt or destroy in all of God's holy mountain. That is quite a to do list. Let's get started.