

“God’s Marbles”  
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky  
12<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 14C) – 10 & 11 August 2019  
Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12:32-40

I have a bag of marbles back in the sacristy, all the same in size and weight, enough for each person here to have one. Before anyone leaves, everyone will draw one marble from the bag, and that’s your marble. No trading. Most are of them are yellow, but a small number are green. And if you get a green marble, it will serve as a sign that God has chosen you to embark on a special mission. This is nothing new, by the way. Remember the disciples cast lots for someone to succeed Judas as an Apostle.

So, if you get a green marble, first, you will go home and put your house on the market, and instead of listing an asking price with a number, just put “Whatever,” and sell to the first bidder. If you rent, notify your landlord that you’re moving out tomorrow.

Next, tape a big world map on a wall. If you don’t have one, you can pick one up at a book store on your way home. Turn the map upside down with the picture part toward the wall so you can’t see it. Then blindfold yourself, and with your back to the wall, throw a dart at the map. If you don’t have a dart, you can find one a sporting goods store. If you hit a body of water, try again until you hit land, and if your dart lands on a place where there might be permanent dwellings, find out what’s for sale or rent, write down all those addresses on 3 x 5 note cards, put them in a cardboard box, and draw one out.

Don’t do any research on that card. Don’t even look it up on Google Earth. Just call the seller or the landlord and make an offer, without asking about the price. Increase your bid until it’s accepted, and then if you have a job, quit. Move immediately to your new home, taking only what you can carry on your back and strap to seven camels. I’ll leave it to you to figure out how

much a camel can carry. After your move, put everything you left at your old home up for sale online with no asking price, accept the first bid for each item, and then give the money to the poor.

Now nobody's left yet, and from that I deduce five things. One, you think I have no marbles, which metaphorically is true on some days. Two, you think that even if there is a bag of marbles and you get a green one, it doesn't matter, either because: three, you think I don't mean what I said; or four, even if I did, you don't have to do anything on the basis on getting a green marble from a bag. Or five, maybe you've stayed because part of you is attracted to the idea that something which seems so random might actually be the work of the Holy Spirit.

Maybe somehow by God's grace you are ready to step into Abraham's sandals and alter your life in the most radical of ways, all on the basis of faith that God has chosen and called you to do something wild, like move away from home to an uncertain destination. Because the frightening demands of getting a green marble closely resemble what happened to Abraham, with a few differences. Abraham didn't have a map or a dart. He had only the vaguest of ideas about where he was going, and he never did find a permanent dwelling place.

Of course, I don't have a bag of marbles, but God does, metaphorically speaking, and all of them are green, and every day, God gives us choices. We can draw a marble from the bag, or avoid it, and if we draw a marble, we can ignore it, or we can accept the marble and act on it with faith.

Now we can take relief from the fact that God summoned Abraham to a unique calling. That guy got a very special green marble, so none of the crazy things I said earlier is likely to happen to any of us. However, every green marble involves some degree of sacrifice,

uncertainty, and lasting change, because faith, once accepted, does not invite. It does not request. Faith does not suggest. It makes demands.

“By faith Abraham obeyed,” Hebrews tells us, and “by faith our ancestors received approval.” Without an active and dedicated faith, we cannot exist in right relationship with God, and we lose “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen,” the two things that really give our lives meaning. With so much at stake – with more at stake than we could possibly imagine – how can we live faithfully?

First, we need to clear up a common confusion by making a distinction between two words: faith and belief. We tend to use them interchangeably, and they are closely related, but there’s a big difference. Belief involves what we think we know about who God is and how God operates and what that means for us. Belief is a brain thing, a reflection on our experience of God, something very necessary yet secondary. Belief is a principally a noun. We can use it as a verb, as we do in the Creed, when we say, “I believe,” but belief is fundamentally a noun.

Faith is a verb that we usually treat like a noun. Faith is fundamentally a verb. It is a heart and gut thing, the actual primal experience we have of God that motivates us in ways belief simply cannot. Faith inspires childlike trust that God will stay faithful to us, no matter how crazy life gets. Faith drives us to strive daily to discern what God wants and how we can surrender to it unconditionally, no matter how inconvenient or insensible it may be. Faith involves standing in awe and reverence and wonder at the mystery of God’s sovereignty and glory. Faith makes us weird, in a healthy, beautiful sort of way. Finally, faith comes as a gift from God for anyone ready to receive it. So faith inspires, drives, involves, makes, and comes – all good action verbs. Faith is an action word, a verb, not a mere thing, like an idea of a belief. To speak of an inactive faith is a contradiction in terms.

That's the what, but what's the how? We need to be disciplined, as true followers of Jesus are, and stay alert. We need to keep vigil, as Jesus commanded in the Gospel of Luke. We need to seek God incessantly by allocating our time and energy wisely. "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

The first thing that comes to mind when we think of treasure is a buried pirate's chest full of precious metals and jewels. In other words, money. But the real treasure in today's world is time, our most precious non-renewable resource, and none of us have any idea how much of it we have left. Yet we still devote big chunks of our time to stuff that doesn't really matter much in the grander scheme of things. It's not that Christians can't have fun. It's not sinful to enjoy watching a good game, but we can do better with how we spend our time, and when do, we feel better. We live better. We faith better.

And a heart full of faith knows that devoting an hour or so a week, every other week or once a month, isn't enough. A good start, but not enough. Adoring and praising God in worship, that's a precious privilege, a powerful, inspiring experience of God that opens us up to receive faith. It's something we need to do at every opportunity, and not just when we're gathered here, but faith means so much more.

To faith is to pray like your life depends on it, because it does. Prayer connects us with the sole source of life. It serves as a dependable way to access God's grace. Maybe we can survive without God's grace. I doubt it, but even if we can survive, I'm convinced that we can't thrive without grace. Any why survive when you can thrive?

To faith is to confess our sins and receive forgiveness and give thanks. To faith means being humble and asking for God's help for ourselves and others without shame. It's not selfish. I know it can feel like that, and certainly there are silly, selfish prayers, like asking for a good

parking space on Black Friday or for the winning lottery numbers. But sincere prayer asks for what we truly need and acknowledges that each of us depends on God. Sit in silence and just listen for God. Who knows what blessing might be given, even if the blessing means radical change?

To faith – remember faith is a verb – to faith means to forgive, and that’s a tough one that usually takes time, especially when someone’s hurt us severely and repeatedly and awoken our anger, but offering that time, being patient enough to work on forgiving brings peace and freedom and offers a profound witness to the faith alive and active inside us. We need to resist the temptation to judge and condemn and blame. There’s no time for that, and it’s God’s job anyway. He has it covered, and we’ve already got plenty of judgment and condemnation in our world. Be merciful, and this applies not only to others. Be kind to yourself, not cruel. Forgive yourself. God loves you. And when you accept forgiveness from God and others, and forgive yourself, you honor God’s love.

The more we explore, the more ways we find to faith, and often it involves giving something away, leaving something behind, and entering into a new reality. When we faith, we stand up for what God wants, no matter what others might think. In the face of hostility and ridicule, we endure and abide in God’s peace. With hope for the future, we live in the present moment, offering ourselves, our souls and bodies, as a living and reasonable sacrifice to serve God’s purposes.

It’s a self-reinforcing, virtuous cycle -- transcendent, supernatural – that leads to “a better country . . . a heavenly one . . . whose architect and builder is God.” The joy of that Kingdom is beyond imagining. And it all starts with a choice about what to do with a little green marble. To paraphrase the great bard, “To faith or not to faith. That is the question.” Amen.

