



**A Sermon preached in Christ Church, Grosse Pointe, Michigan  
by The Reverend Ron Spann, *Visiting Priest***

**The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost**

**10 August, 2025**

*In the Name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.*

Nice to be here and not on YouTube this morning to be with you. So this is 2025. Back in August of 1971, I was a mere boy priest. I had just been ordained that January's priest and I was on my way to becoming director of the parish, a Church of the Messiah, down on Detroit's east side, an urban parish that should have lovely pastoral leadership and care for the neighborhood. A church army sister, small black woman named Sister Hilda Manson, who was a dynamo in her own right. But Messiah was on hard times. And the diocese stepped in to provide funding for clergy. We had a new arch deacon, arch Deacon Mason, who worked hard to arrange for salaries for two clergy. That was quite a commitment. And so boy priest, and then the man who would be the associate pastor, a rector, a married priest with a family of three children would be the associate coming to us from Colorado.

And several things led me to accept this calling that I had to sort through. But there were lots of things auspicious about the time. Part of it being that I as a boy priest was still not even 12 months a priest, was someone who had had a hankering to live in a monastery. I could have stayed in Boston and been a very happy man and joined the Cowley fathers. I was so monastic in my thinking. But indeed, I left, came here unmarried, and the prospect of seeing something different had been inspired earlier in that summer by visiting an Episcopal church in Houston, Texas called Church of the Redeemer, which was quite remarkable because there in the ninth ward of Houston, this Episcopalian parish had created this communitarian ministry.

At that time there were 300 adults and children, the rector and other clergy leading a community of Christians who had moved to that neighborhood to become part of Redeemer. They formed households, families were combining with other single people living together. And all of a sudden, a light bulb went on for Ron. Well, I didn't have to be a celibate monastic, maybe because God had got hold of me and poured the Holy Spirit on me too, that I could be the pastor of the charismatic community.



And the people down there in Texas heard me out because I got in touch with them and I said, I'm about to become a new pastor. Can you help me? They said yes. And the rest would shortly become history. But they did require that I go to the bishop and be sure that I had his permission to do this, to get authorized as he didn't want any strange goings on to take place there. And oh, we are more than glad to step that out.

So, myself, this new priest and his three children, I shared with them what I was hoping for. They were a little wary, but they said, okay, we'll give it a try. And within the next five years, we would eventually grow to a fellowship of between 75 to a hundred people, all of whom had relocated. Some were married people, families with children relocated from wherever they had been before into that neighborhood of Detroit. None of them had ever lived in the inner city before. Very few of these. And we were the inverse in racial to the neighborhood, only about a quarter of us were people of color. The rest were white American, middle-class Americans, Protestants, Catholics who had found their way to be there as part of that.

And eventually the fellowship would grow to about a hundred people and church attendance might be 200 on a Sunday, but half of them were what we called the Common Life Group. We are the ones who had decided to come together on a communitarian basis, meaning that we now own property together. The houses we lived in, in many cases we had households that included a married family and single adults. Some households were all singles. Some household might be just a couple solely. The Common Life Group were the ones known to have decided to make this communitarian commitment for the ministry. Some left their professional jobs out in the marketplace to come do things full-time in the life of the church. Others became the source of income for our group because we were pooling our income. The Diocesan support only lasted for a couple of years because we were so busy doing prayer meetings and stuff like that. It wasn't what they thought they were going for in an urban ministry, so they dropped commitment to one of the salaries and that left just my salary, and Father Dean and family said, well, we'll share.

And eventually over the next journey, the journey of 15 years, this arrangement persisted there on the corner of East Grand Boulevard and Lafayette. And we were scattered, nobody lived much farther than four blocks away from the church. So, there had been relocation. We had learned to live together. We were learning the laws of reconciliation, of living a common life. We had martyrs and saints. A martyr is someone who must live with a saint, a saint is someone who must live with a martyr. Martyrs, saints and sinners all living together, and we had to learn a lot because we made a lot of mistakes, a lot of people got badly hurt. And then at the same time, some astonishing things happened. And I stayed for another 10 years after the Common Life Group, as we called ourselves, chose to make for a variety of reasons, we knew the time had come for us to turn from that direction.



But that allowed Church of the Messiah then to enter itself even more fully into the life of the neighborhood. That journey had already started some years ago. Our first five years, we were very much learning the ropes of what we had just committed ourselves. Our families were going crazy. What are you doing with those people down there in that neighborhood? We had a lot to put together, but it kind of came together by five years and we were getting a lot of help from outside groups. And that five-year point was important because finally, the Ron Spann, who was a young African American who had grown up in the fifties and sixties, who had been drawn into the prophetic vision of Martin Luther King and others, now I had time to put a few more things together that had not been as prominent.

And we found people like this strange guy named Jim Wallis from a group that was about to call themselves Sojourners come, and we connected with each other. Very soon we were part of a network of Christians around the country. A Catholic priest named Richard Rohr was down in Cincinnati. And so we met with Richard's community, and they visited our community, and we were learning something about a discipleship where we had a life in common and we didn't do so well in the part that Jesus gives us today of selling your possessions. We had to disencumber ourselves of things. What we did do, we learned to share our income. There was some selling of possessions and so on. But you get the picture, we were people on a journey, something very transformative happened among us, and as I say, after that first five-year mark, then we were able to go into a period when we began to put this whole thing together.

And if you ask me now, I learned to say, well, Church of the Messiah, what is Church of the Messiah? Well, it is a Pentecostal and a Baptist African Catholic church. Does that help? And people would have to put together what they thought I meant by that. But we were searching how to be faithful, how to be authentic expressions of discipleship of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And it came at a cost. One of our members would be murdered. We suffered thefts. We experienced break-ins in our houses in the early days, things that could make us want to turn around and not stay. And for some they needed to leave and not stay. And I'm sharing this story because it is a history that I can embody and testify to of what it meant to wrestle with the call to faith, to the obedience of faith as St. Paul would later write in the Romans.

But Jesus had spoken the words before, words like the ones that we just heard in our Gospel today where he looks at this lovely cluster of disciples that he's formed, apostles and other disciples, he's already been training them. He's already helping them learn the ropes of the ropes, of forming a life in common and how to live with each other out of the energies of faith and hope and love. And that somehow love could be the foundation of it all, but that it would be something that would impart life



and give vision and also bring the strength and the energies of the moral vision. So we were learning in Jesus' words, to seek the kingdom of God and its righteousness about its spiritual vision and also a moral vision that was worthy of it.

So, what do we do now in 2025? I no longer live in a communitarian, quasi-monastic setting anymore, but I know that my life was deeply touched, my values were deeply touched, my understanding. And so I'm still on a journey like you and here we are together. You're the little flock that Jesus was speaking to this morning, the Greek word for small is the word micro, like when we say microchip. So you're the micro flock.

So Jesus micro flock here, Christ Church, Jesus wants you also to pay attention to what you treasure because Jesus wants us to look and behold all that we treasure, all that we control and have within our discretion and control our possessions. And what he said in the year 30 or so, he is still saying to the micro flock, to the little flock in 2025, sell your possessions, give alms and seek a treasure which cannot be taken from you and a purse that cannot be destroyed. This is my call. Jesus says to us in our time, in our moment, how do we do that?

You may want to go down to the corner of East Lafayette and East Grand Boulevard and to see if there's a chance to catch a vision. But no, where are you? Where do you live? Where do we live? Where do we find ourselves walking and yet having to hear and make sense of these words in our lives. That's important to us at this time in history because as American Christians, we live in the belly of the beast. We are for the rest of the world, what the Roman Empire was for Jesus and the people of his state. Much of the world. on the one hand that has been at moments a sign of inspiration and hope with the vision of American democracy.

And yet what we also learned is that there's a whole other reality that comes with America with its growth and with its aspirations. And we have become like the nations that are described here in our psalm today, the Lord looks down from heaven, sees humankind from where he sits and watches the inhabitants of the earth, has fashioned the hearts of them all and observes their deeds. A king is not saved by his great army. A warrior is not delivered by his great strength. The warhorses of vain hope for victory.

We have strength, and weaponry, and aspirations, and resources unknown in the history of humanity concentrated in American control. And we are not proving to be very good stewards of it. It is something that has corrupted our lives. I stand before you as the descendant of slaves, meaning that for a long part of our journey as Americans, human life could be devalued and treated as not human and without rights.



This is part of what we receive and justice in the garden. When the tempter came and checked out with Adam and Eve and said, no, God spoke to you, and what did God tell you about that tree of knowledge of good and evil? What did God say to you about that? And of course, we know what happened when the man and the woman went there and their minds got played with. We are Adam and Eve and as the Christian Church, we have a stewardship of truth to say to the world.

And unfortunately, some of the fruit that we ate in the ascension of our country came off the tree of the knowledge of wealth, not the tree of knowing wealth because we ate at that fruit and the enemy came and said, what did God tell you about money? And the American and the American Christian is likely to say, well, money is all right, what's important is what you do with it. And that would be the advice that the enemy had to the American Adam and Eve eating from the tree of the knowledge of wealth.

But what did God say? What did Jesus say? What you treasure is what you will attach your heart to, what you will give your heart to where your treasure is. There also, will your heart be for Jesus? Jesus never said it. It doesn't want to as neutral. It just matters how you use it. You won't find it in the gospel tradition. What you will find is that you cannot serve God and man, you cannot serve God and wealth. You love the one and hate the other or hate them one and love the other. So, you cannot serve them for Jesus. Money is always funny. So, what that requires of us then is we must deal with it. We've got a world with material and commercial values. What does it mean then to deal with it in a way that manifests what God wants for the human heart?

And so it is with this counsel, Jesus says, well, that's easy. Redistribute the wealth. God has put this out here. God has made the human heart. God wants the human heart to know what gives it dignity and nobility. And part of that is going to come through a human community where none is missing, all are known to be present and valued, no one is left out and all have access to the needs of life and human dignity. So, take from the resources of the earth, the things that have a source of wealth and find a way to share them with each other that does not lead you to hoard, and to become its enslaved captive through the addiction to wealth that so characterizes America.

So, it's us. It's the body of Christ, the representatives of that invading kingdom of God who is here to help us in the belly of the beast, to live in an obedient kind of faith that lets God take us out so that we can relocate our lives and our values. Like the people who went to Messiah had to learn how to relocate, literally relocate to go be there, God wants to deal with us to learn the values of reconciliation so that a nation that is fraught with its conflicts of race, gender, and class can find a way to love and embrace and reverence one another's lives and one another's identity.



God wants us to learn to redistribute, to take the things that otherwise would just be transformed and amassed for the wealth and privilege that only a few get access to, to redistribute that, to redistribute it and according to a vision so like those early Christians, there were none among them that had any need and they had all things together in common. That is something humans really can pull off because God has created us, God who gave us our hearts, God who energizes our hearts and gives our hearts a hunger and a thirst for what is real and authentic. That is what we are called to today.

So yes, I said we didn't quite get to the point of really selling our possessions at Church of the Messiah during our common life days. In a way we did it because by pooling our income, like when I began to share my salary with Father Dean, I had a very meager, after 25 years of being a priest in the Episcopal Church, a very meager financial profile on which the Episcopal church could do something about my pension.

Thank God I became the first black associate director of Christ Church Cranbrook for about five years, that helped a lot. That helped a whole lot.

Didn't get me to the same place where others who would've had my same seniority were able to go, but that's all right. That's not what controls my life. That's not what controls my vision. And my heart is full and remains hopeful because of what God did show, even when what we were doing was at least to share our income and to find a way to redistribute. It's what allows us to turn a dying apartment building whose owners lived up in Macomb County and could care less about it right across the street from the church and it caught on fire. And we found ourselves not wanting to have another empty shell in the neighborhood across the street from our church building. God gave us that building. . If you ever eat Kogel sausages, eat a lot of them, because Al Kogel was the Christian who subsidized a whole lot of what happened that enabled us to get our hands on that building and we developed it to become a co-op that now for the last 30 plus years is its own entity, lived in and owned by the people from that neighborhood who at the Church's Challenge would make it there at the Mustard Tree Co-op

Well, that's my encouragement to you, church, a precious little flock. Jesus loves you. God knows I love you; Jackie and I love you dearly and thank you so much for what you mean to us. And I just want to encourage your faith, this day a faith that helps us together, trust where God would take us and to do what we could not do without that gift of faith. Amen.