



THE LENTEN MEDITATIONS 2023 – WEEK 4

HOPE AND THE RICH FOOL

BY TARA LUDWIG

In the world of social media, it is common for people to post photos of themselves traveling to exotic locations, eating a lavish meal, or doing something exciting along with the hashtag, “Living My Best Life”. This catchphrase, “Living My Best Life”, as I understand it, means getting the most out of life by filling it with as much pleasure, luxury, and excitement as possible. It is hyper-focused on the improvement and advancement of the ego-self; having the best body, the best adventures, the best possessions; “living my best life” means living the kind of successful and glamorous life that people will envy.

But is a constant striving for personal gain and self-gratification really the best way to live out a human life? In James 3:16 it says, “For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.” I know I’m showing my age here, but the “living my best life” phenomenon feels disordered to me, I don’t trust it. I think it reveals our society’s lack of insight about what a human being is actually for, as if the whole point of our existence is to enjoy ourselves as much as possible before things close down. It places all the attention on the self, ignoring that we are at heart relational beings. But what worries me most about the cultural emphasis on “living my best life” is that it exposes the profound hopelessness that’s plaguing our world. We have lost hope in the deeper things like love, connection and meaning, friendship, generosity and goodwill; and in their place we have accepted luxury, self-indulgence, and pleasure as cheap substitutes; as if some decadent fun is the most we can hope for out of this life.

I see parallels here between our modern world and the people of Jesus’ time, as we will hear now in the Gospel of Luke, when Jesus is interrupted in the middle of a sermon by someone shouting out in the crowd:



One of the multitude said to Jesus, “teacher, bid my brother divide the inheritance with me.” but Jesus said to him, “man, who made me a judge or divider over you?” and he said to them, “take heed, and beware of all covetousness; for a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.” and Jesus told them a parable, saying, “the land of a rich man brought forth plentifully; and he thought to himself, “what shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?” and he said, “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; take your ease, eat, drink, be merry.” but God said to him, “fool this night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” so is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich towards God.” (Luke 12:13-21)

“Take your ease, eat, drink, and be merry.” Sound familiar? If Facebook had existed in ancient Israel, this man would have posted a photo of himself in front of his large grain stores with the hashtag “living my best life”. But Jesus, in his teaching, is telling us that a life lived only for oneself is not a good life at all; it is a sad, small life; the rich fool thinks only of his own desires but no amount of grain will truly satisfy him. This is part of the paradox of the Christian message: when we chase after joy, hope, and peace just for ourselves, we lose them; it is only through creating joy, hope, and peace for *others* that we find them for ourselves. We can only live our best life, in God’s eyes, when we put the lives of others ahead of our own.

In contrast to the “living my best life” phenomenon, which is driven by a lack of hope, is something called the Seventh Generation Principle, which stresses that hope is relational. According to theseventhgeneration.org, The Seventh Generation Principle is “an Indigenous Concept, to think of the 7th generation coming after you in your words, work and actions, and to remember the seventh generation who came before you”. In other words, the Seventh Generation Principle reminds us that we are connected to a community that transcends time; we are here because of the people who existed before us, and the things we choose to say and do will continue to affect people long after we’re gone. I love this; it highlights the responsibility we have for each other, and also the power we have to create hope, or hopelessness, for others. I am here today because my ancestors in Italy moved to America 100 years ago hoping for a better life; and I have



hope that the choices I make now- the work I do, the way I spend money, the way I raise my children- will all contribute to the healing of the world, even if I don't live to see it. We as Christians have a hope that extends beyond our time on earth, that reaches into the lives of others who will come after us, and into our eternal life. It makes "living my best life" seem awfully small, doesn't it?

So my invitation to you, as I send you off into your life in this fourth week of Lent, is to contemplate the Seventh Generation Principle as it applies to your own life. What decisions were made Seven Generations ago (that's 150 years, FYI) that impact you and the people you love today? And how could your life, and the choices you make, create hope for people you will never meet, seven generations into the future?

I'll leave you today with a poem by Jesuit priest and social Activist Daniel Berrigan:

*Sometime in your life
hope that you might see one starved man
the look on his face when the bread finally arrives.
Hope that you might have baked it
or bought
or even kneaded it yourself.
For that look on his face,
for your meeting his eyes across a piece of bread,
you might be willing to lose a lot,
or suffer a lot,
or die a little, even.*

May the hope of Christ fill you and enfold you in this fourth week of Lent. Amen.