Ninth Sunday After Pentecost

Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Jeannie D. Thompson

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*“Action Figures”* Luke 12:32-40

One of the abiding features of the Gospel of Luke is the way in which we are continually invited to put aside our fear. Instead, we are to be people of action, people who respond to the need they see around them.

Recently, I read a book about such a man of action. The book is called, *A Man Called Ove* by Frederick Backman. Ove, the main character, is not someone you would automatically think of as a “hero.” While he is a deeply moral and trust-worthy man, who is a mechanical genius and an expert with numbers, Ove is also grumpy, fastidious to a fault, has little use for people, and would have been completely cut-off from people if it were not for his wife who is the great love of his life.

As the book opens, we find that Ove’s wife has died a few months before and so he is at loose ends. Indeed, in the first few pages we begin to suspect that he is plotting to commit suicide because he is so lost without her.

Just as he is about to execute his plan, he is interrupted by a new neighbor who has backed-up his trailer into Ove’s house. Ove is so outraged by the destruction that he momentarily forgets himself and goes out and moves the man’s vehicle himself…so he will not cause any more damage.

What follows is a series of events where Ove’s expertise is constantly being prevailed upon…and he responds. He responds because he is a man of action. He is not a hero who rushes to the side of every person in need. He is a grumpy misanthrope who cannot stand to let things (and people) go unattended when there is a perfectly good and simple remedy.

Ove is a man of action, an Action Figure. And so, by the end of the book, Ove has responded to so many neighbors’ need of his expertise that when he dies (at the end of the book), over three hundred people crowd into the small church to pay their last respects.

Ove knew what his gifts were, and he used them…sometimes he used them while complaining and grumpy, but he was never afraid nor hesitant about using them.

Never afraid, Luke tells us throughout the Gospel—even from the beginning of his book, he tells us this.

“Do not be afraid,” says the Angel Gabriel when he appears to Mary and tells her she is to be the Mother of God.

“Do not be afraid,” he has already said to Zechariah when he told him that he and Elizabeth were finally going to be parents.

“Do not be afraid,” says the whole host of heaven to the shepherds in the fields on the night of Jesus’ birth.

From the very start—even before Jesus is born—God has been sending messages to human beings that we are not to be afraid. Above all, let us put aside our fear of acting, of being Action Figures—like Mary, and the shepherds at Christmas, and (eventually) Zechariah.

Now, again, in the passage we heard this morning, the same words of invitation to be without fear are on Jesus’ lips as he speaks to the disciples.

“Do not be afraid little flock.” Do not be afraid because we have already been given everything we need. We have been abundantly gifted by God, who loves us and desires good for us.

We have already been given gift of life, and the earth beneath our feet that is our home, and which is a place of abundance that provides us with food, and everything else that sustains life. We have also been given the gift of eternal life, the gift of the Holy Spirit in Baptism, and the gift of Christ’s body and blood in Communion

In fact, Jesus goes on to say, we are to be so confident of God’s promise to care for us that we are ready and able to get rid of the “stuff,” the material possessions we own, and give the proceeds to the poor. We can do this because we can have confidence in God and God’s word. No longer will we need to put our faith in material things. Our faith and our confidence will come from knowing that we are loved by God.

It is also important to note that we are able to do this not because our salvation directly depends on divesting ourselves of “things.” Ridding ourselves of our possessions does not make us more “pure,” nor is it a “quid pro quo”—give up your stuff and you will be saved.

Rather, the idea is to free ourselves so that we may be ready. We need to be ready so that when God calls, when the opportunity presents itself, we are ready to go into action!

Instead of being held back by the necessary care and maintenance of the “things” of our life, the idea is to be ready to jump into action right away. Instead of spending our energy on every other distraction, entertainment, or diversion of our lives, we are to be ready to seize every opportunity to spread the good news.

For those of us who hear this and worry that we are being asked to be more extroverted about our faith than we are used to being, asked to be ready to *act* should be good news because it means that our *actions,* the way we live our lives, is the important thing to dwell on and express. It is very much in keeping with what St. Francis is purported to have said: “Preach the Gospel always—*if necessary, use words.*”

So, being alert and being ready is like potential energy that is to be held, conserved and ready to be turned into *kinetic* energy when prompted. We are to be people of actions, people of deeds. We are to be “Action Figures,” and the energy conveyed here is gospel centered: healing, justice, love, grace, peace, and so much more.

Last week, together, we collected a small mountain of school supplies that are blessing children at three or four schools. We jumped into action. We were Action Figures that day.

Every week, on this campus, we are a host to a variety of people. There are children and youth who enjoy education and sports practice. For a couple of weeks, our neighbors at the memory care center, just down the street, needed to use our parking lot as the road in front of their facility was blocked by construction. This seems like a simple thing, but for the people who work there and the visitors, it was a kind and helpful gesture; a kind and helpful action.

In addition to Family Promise, and the funerals and weddings that are held here, we also make available at very reasonable cost, our Sanctuary so that another congregation who is not as old and as established as we are have a place to worship.

All of these things are able to happen because of the way we have administered stewardship of our resources over the years.

During these past four or five years, as we look ahead to the future, we have come to the realization that we are in a unique position to provide more and more opportunities for healing, justice, love and grace through the continued and thoughtful use of our church campus, through partnerships with community groups who are also concerned with the physical, mental, and spiritual well-being of the community.

We are, and we can be a place that persons from wider community can point to and say, “There, that church over there, Nu’uanu Congregational Church, that is where:

* I take my daughter to her Scout meeting.”
* I bought worms to start my own green project at home. (Those people at NCC seem to care about caring for the earth!)”
* My family and I were welcomed, sheltered, and fed as we got back on our feet. They are the folks who made sure my children had new school supplies like all of the other kids at their school.”

Friends, there are so many ways in which we can be the Action Figures that take on projects that make life better for others. I have mentioned a few that are tangible, but there are also the *in*tangibles that call to us—like our prayers for peace that we can say together. These are the things that can transform our hearts and lives, especially when we act together.

There are those times when we lift our voices on behalf of others. This goes a long way toward making others know they are not alone, it builds confidence and courage, and even builds a community.

There are the votes we cast in the elections that are so much on our television sets and on our minds and in our hearts. We can vote for people we believe want to build a better community for all of us.

As we reflect of the good gifts God has given all of us, I pray each of us will see and embrace the urgent message of the Gospel, which is that people of action are needed, and that people of God have been given all of the gifts and talents they need to act for the common good. I hope we will embrace and celebrate the way in which God has made us all Action Figures. May this be so. Amen.