

Rev. Gusti Linnea Newquist  
“Live Long and Prosper”

Based on \*Luke 7:18-22. Jesus Confirms He Is “The One”

*\*translation below*

Three weeks ago, on a hot June Sunday afternoon, yours truly practiced what we call “the ministry of presence” during what I hope will become the *first annual* Guns to Gardens event in Shepherdstown.

Car after car after car pulled through the Shepherdstown Fire Department parking lot with gun after gun after gun to be transformed from a weapon of violence into a means of grace. Buzz saws hummed and light torches flared nonstop for two hours straight. A cluster of volunteers who had never worked together on anything before pulled off a logistical feat worthy of any rescue mission you may have heard of on the news. Gun enthusiasts mingled with those who would be more than happy to wipe guns off the face of the planet. Stories were shared. Friendships were made. To a person, the consensus became, *we are so glad this is happening; this needs to happen again.*

As what I hope will become the first annual Guns to Gardens event in Shepherdstown came to a heartwarming conclusion, I could not help but proclaim to anyone with ears to hear and eyes to see: *THIS is what it means to be the church!*

If our Lesson from Luke is any indication, John the Baptist would agree. From Guns to Gardens to the Community Meal, from the caring of our Deacon Shepherds to the celebration of our children and youth, from generous giving in the community to heartfelt self-examination of this congregation’s history of racial harm, from fixing the air conditioning in the sanctuary for a summer funeral to lifting our souls through the music of angels, from showing up at the Martinsburg PRIDE festival to standing in solidarity with the Poor People’s Campaign, our ministry, in The Way and Spirit of Jesus, is all about restoring insight, raised people to new life, healing, awakening, and shouting good news.

No need to look any further for a prosperous church. We are the ones we are waiting for.

Like Jesus, however, we know too well the challenge of prosperous ministry in service to the reign of God. What seems obvious to us remains a scandal for some.

No matter. We who know what it is to be blinded by ignorance and fear; we who know what it is to plod our way through a tortured existence; we who know what it is to succumb to spiritual and social and physical sickness with no hope in sight; we who have lived as the walking dead; we who have been destitute in body and soul have found healing enough through this vision of God’s reign that we cannot help but sing Alleluia in the face of rebuke and keep on doing what we have already been doing. And those who have *not* been scandalized by this ministry, as Jesus reminds us in our Lesson, have received a blessing beyond measure.

How do we know if a church is prospering? Just look around, Jesus says, to John and to us. The very reign of God, through YOUR ministry, is at hand.

To be fair, we may be tempted to question our prosperity, our individual prosperity, our collective prosperity, our prosperity as a congregation, when so much adversity has befallen us, and so much of what used to mark our prosperity has changed, and none of us is all that sure how our future prosperity or even present prosperity will unfold.

To be fair, the church writ large, and yours truly as your pastor, even with all of our access to spiritual maturity and the wisdom of the ages, can far too easily fall into the trap of ego-driven standards of success: are we big enough, are we talented enough, are we smart enough, are we put together enough, are we doing enough, do we have enough money, do we have enough time, do we have enough education, do we have enough Sunday School teachers, and on and on and on.

All of which Jesus will validate with compassion and concern ... followed by a swift kick in the rear and a gentle reminder that the church most often does its best ministry when we are backed up against a wall: when two or three of us gather around the mission that has been given to us, sustained by a lump of bread, a thimble-full of juice, a drip of water, and a word of hope ... *and just do it!*

The good news for us at SPC is that our mission remains clear: to welcome all who long for meaning, hope, and belonging; to practice radical compassion in all we do; and to work for justice and wholeness in ourselves and in the world. As long as we keep doing these things, propelled as we must always be by the grace of God, whether there are fifty of us or five hundred of us doing it, we cannot help but prosper!

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Luke 7:18-22

Jesus has announced his calling to  
proclaim good news to the poor,  
release to the captives,  
recovery of sight for those who struggle to perceive,  
and liberty to the oppressed.

In other words, Jesus says,  
the very reign of God is at hand  
through his ministry.

Even Jesus cannot enact the reign of God on his own.  
He recruits students - disciples, we call them -

to learn how to do what he does:  
preach the good news of the reign of God;  
teach the good news of the reign of God;  
heal those who hurt in this world that is  
so far away from the good news of the reign of God.

John the Baptist,  
who shares this vision,  
hears what Jesus is up to.

John sends his own students to Jesus  
to find out if Jesus is “The One”  
or if they should keep looking.

In that very moment,  
Jesus is healing many who are sick,  
comforting many who are afflicted in body and spirit,  
and restoring clarity of perception to many  
who are blinded by ignorance and fear.

Jesus answers the question by saying,  
“Go and report to John  
what you have seen and heard here:  
Those who are blinded by ignorance and fear  
are restored to sight;  
Those who plod their way through a tortured existence  
are raised to new life;  
Those who succumb to sickness with no hope in sight  
have been healed;  
Those who live as the walking dead  
have been awakened;  
Those who are destitute  
have heard good news;  
And those who are not scandalized by my ministry  
have received a blessing beyond measure.”