

Pentecost 12, Proper 14
Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12:32-40

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Last weekend I received a text message from one of our La Gracia members. She was relaying the news that one of the pillars of the congregation, Petrona Munoz, had been taken to the hospital. Petrona is in her nineties and has been getting frailer over this past year, so the news was not a surprise, but rather, a confirmation that her declining health had taken a more serious turn. I rushed over to the hospital with my Spanish-language BCP in hand, ready to pray for her. When I arrived in her room I found she was very weak. Her granddaughter told me she was in the final stages of leukemia, which I did not know she had. I may have been told in Spanish previously, but had missed the diagnosis. I knew of her other ailments, ones that often plague folk who have worked hard manual labor jobs. “Leukemia,” I sighed. Yet another heavy burden for a woman who had carried much during her long, hard life. I stepped closer to her bed.

As soon as I bent over her sleeping form, Petrona’s eyes flew open and she gripped my hand. “Padre nuestro, que estas en el cielo,” she quickly began “Our father, who art in heaven...” She was launching us into last rights. She was ready to go. Bernarda, a friend from the congregation, handed me her BCP and I quickly found the prayers at the time of death. We finished with “Into your hands, O merciful Savior, we commend your servant, Petrona. Acknowledge, we humbly beseech you, a sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming...” She closed her eyes and I could see her willing herself into the arms of God. I said to her, “Estas lista? You’re ready?” I had to speak in a loud voice because her hearing is not what it used to be. She nodded. It suddenly occurred to me that she would soon be on the other side – in heaven with Jesus. I had an image of her there as if she had just paused at the side of the road and was about to enter a house. I asked her if she would wait for me with her lamp held high, while I was on my camino, on my journey toward heaven. This made her chuckle. “Si, Madre. La llevaré arriba.” Of course Mother, I will hoist it high.” She liked the idea of that image of holding her light aloft in heaven to guide her friends who will come after her.

You can imagine my smile as I opened the lectionary for today and found the Gospel reading from St. Luke. “Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks.” I have told you all this story about Petrona because I honestly think she would like to preach this passage to you herself. It is what having faith and living as a Christian is all about. It’s a little heavy to think about, but it is the ultimate question we must consider – our own mortality. What will happen when we meet our maker? And the fact that it can happen at any moment scares a lot of people.

Last week in the gospel reading we heard about a man who asked Jesus to tell his brother to give him his half of his inheritance. Jesus replied sternly, “to him, ‘Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?’” (Lk 12:14) And then he told the parable of the rich fool, who was planning to hoard his wealth and about to find out upon his death that he was poor before God. Today we stay on the topic of where you focus your attention: on this world or on the Kingdom of God. Jesus tells us don’t fear, be generous, store up faith not greed, be ready - dressed for action and with your lamps lit. Your Master will return at any moment. Frankly, I don’t know about you, but that sounds exhausting to me.

But then I thought about Petrona and how her deep faith and trust in God has been a pillar holding up the La Gracia congregation for years. I thought about the many people in our community, in our nation, and in the world that are holding the lamps high. I hope you had a chance to watch the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games in Rio on Friday. Not only would you have enjoyed the beautiful creativity of the visual artists who designed the show and seen the parade of athletes, you would have witnessed the first laurel award presentation. The Olympic Laurel will be presented to former Olympians who have benefitted humanity. The first has been awarded to a man named Kipchoge Keino.

“Kip” won many medals and set world records as a distance runner in the mid-twentieth century. Now 73, he remains very active. Kip has worked tirelessly over the decades to better the lives of orphans and youth in Eldoret, Kenya. He established an orphanage, two primary schools, and an athletics training program to ensure Kenya will have many future Olympians. One Kenyan newspaper wrote that, “Anybody who meets Kip will hear this mantra: “We enter the world with nothing and we’ll all leave the world with nothing. An accomplished life is finding a balance in health, family and using our God-given skills to make the world a better place”” (Kenyan Yetu, August 2016.) A deeply faithful man, Kip took the light of the Olympic Torch and the lamp he holds high for God and has spread that light in a very poor part of the world.

There are saints we remember and saints who walk among us today. The “cloud of witness” who hold their lamps high, who change the world and bless their communities by their faith and hard work. We are a community that is very blessed. I am wondering if you have considered how you might hold the lamp up in your place and time. We are each uniquely endowed by God with the gifts, resources, and talents that can be a blessing to others. Different stages of life might hold different answers for how we might be a blessing. For a child, it might be that out of the message they have received at church that they are deeply loved by God, can be the one who says, “sit next to me” to the kid who has been bullied.

For a teen, it might be knowing the abundance in their lives and taking a week off in the summer to re-build homes on mission in New Jersey. For a parent with young children, it might be loving their neighbors by volunteering their talents at school. For retirees, it may be feeling ready to choose to work for God and volunteering here at Grace and running a food pantry. If you are one who has been richly blessed, perhaps you have become involved in charities and community organizations. If you are looking for ways to get in gear and get out there blessing folk, come talk to me – I can hook you up with one of the many ministries at Grace. There are so many ways to “Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit.” What that really means, is will the light you hold up in this life welcome Christ when he comes to you? Will he find you with a full heart, feeling blessed and alert? I may need to wag my finger at you at this point as Jesus did when he said to the people, “But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

If there was ever a Christian ready for action and holding her lamp up, it was Petrona Munoz. Petrona died early yesterday afternoon. I’m sure death was not a thief that broke in during her night. Because her lamp was ready, she welcomed her master home with that pool of her light and he was very pleased with her.

Amen.