

**Trinity Church in the City of Boston**  
The Rev. Morgan S. Allen  
Sunday, July 31, 2022  
VIII Pentecost  
*Ecclesiastes 1:2,12-14,2:18-23; Luke 12:13-21*

Come Holy Spirit, and kindle in the hearts of your faithful the fire of your love. *Amen.*

In 1849, the grandfather of John Alfred Brashear took his nine-year-old grandson to the town square in Brownsville, Pennsylvania.<sup>i</sup> Some thirty miles south of Pittsburgh, a traveling proprietor had arrived in the village with a telescope, and he invited the townsfolk – for five cents – to come and have a peek through the glass. The senior Brashear, appreciating his eldest grandchild’s interest in the stars, took the young boy, and John, his nickel paid, bent down and looked through the lens.

Through the instrument, John saw the moon, yet the moon like he had never seen it before: instead of only distant shadow and mystery he saw its alien craters, the rough terrain of its mountains, and the sweep of its great valleys. The proprietor of the exhibition, recognizing the boy’s enthusiasm, leaned over, shifted the telescope, and invited him to look once more. Brashear again looked through and this time he saw Saturn, yet not Saturn only, but its marvelous rings.

This childhood experience set John Alfred Brashear’s imagination ablaze for the cosmos’ ethereal worlds, changing not only the direction of his vocation, but, in time, that of humankind.

During these five weeks of July, we have traced the missionary ministry of Jesus and his disciples right through the center of Luke’s Gospel. As we read back during the Fourth of July weekend, chapter 10 begins with Jesus commissioning seventy of his followers to go ahead of him and to share the Good News. Jesus sends this motley band two-by-two and with the encouragement, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go on your way.”<sup>ii</sup>

When the messengers return “with joy,” they breathlessly announce, “Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!”<sup>iii</sup> Rather than surprise (much less congratulations), Jesus admonishes the apostles. Matter-of-factly he declares: “I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at *this*, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”<sup>iv</sup>

See, Jesus clarifies God as the source of every good gift, and that faith’s blessings are never for the sake of the faithful alone, but always for the sake of God’s greater hopes, always for the sake of the whole creation’s welfare.

Two Sundays later, we read the story of Martha and Mary, which concludes Chapter 10.<sup>v</sup> In a reinforcing teaching on faith's priorities, Jesus admonishes Martha as "worried and distracted by many things."<sup>vi</sup> Jesus explains to her that "there is need of only one thing." Pointing to Mary, sitting at his feet, he declares that Mary "has chosen the better part."<sup>vii</sup> Again, Jesus makes clear that Martha's problem is not only that she chooses busy-ness before attentiveness, but that she sees herself – *her* preferences and *her* priorities – as the telos of her offering, that her labor has her own affirmation as its primary end.

Finally, in last week's lesson from Chapter 11,<sup>viii</sup> the disciples ask Jesus how to pray, and Jesus, of course, commends them to petition God for their "daily bread;" reiterates the sufficiency of God's provision; and offers the familiar trilogy of "ask ... seek ... knock."<sup>ix</sup> In the continuum of these several teaching moments in Luke, Jesus' promise is not a holy monkey's paw, but another admonishment. He clarifies, "Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? ... how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"<sup>x</sup>

That is, Jesus challenges the disciples to let go of their own anxious desires and to want what God wants, trusting that in pursuing *God's* hopes, *then* they will encounter God's most generous provision ... *then* they will find their own, deepest fulfillment.

The Brashear family's finances required the curious John Alfred leave school at thirteen, move to Pittsburgh, and learn the "pattern-maker's" trade in the metal-casting industry.<sup>xi</sup> In time, Brashear went to work at Mr. Zug's steel mill, where he became an expert mechanic. He would stay at the mill for 20 years, eventually running its operation.<sup>xii</sup>

During those mill years, Brashear met Phoebe Stewart over supper one night at the boarding house where they both lived. The couple married in the fall of 1862 and built – with their own hands – a small home on the South Side of Pittsburgh. John shared with Phoebe his love of the stars and his curiosity for the heavens, and together they studied astronomy. They filled their modest home with every textbook they could acquire, reading to one another, not only of stars and planets, but eventually optics, for Brashear was committed that if he could not afford a telescope like the one that had captured him so many years before, then he would make one.

In time, John and Phoebe wrought the carriage for a very fine telescope, but they lacked the most important – and most expensive – element: *the lens*. In a tiny shop behind his house, John Alfred Brashear built a grinding machine, and, with Phoebe's help, set to making a twelve-inch reflector, an impossibly precise, concave mirror, from a square glass about the size of a supper plate. The lens had to be perfect – *flawless* – for it to serve the instrument they had prepared, and after John's long days at the mill, the couple spent every evening polishing this glass.

For two years, the Brashears kept this devotion until, finally, they declared their work complete. John decided to take their lens to Samuel Pierpont Langley, who had recently been commissioned as the director of the Alleghany Observatory in the Alleghany Township just outside of Pittsburgh and not far from where they lived. With Phoebe's help, they dusted the glass, washed it carefully, and John held it up to the light, perhaps to admire once more the sum

of their labors ... but the heavy, curved glass, having been polished for so long, had become very slick; the lens slipped from John's hands, fell to the ground, and shattered into a thousand pieces.

This morning's appointment continues the July series of teachings on priority and provision and charges the disciples' richness toward God. "Then," the twelfth chapter of Luke's Gospel continues, "[Jesus] told them a parable."<sup>xiii</sup> Following that setup, the parable begins with two important details, an adjective and an adverb: "The land of a *rich* man produced *abundantly*."<sup>xiv</sup> See, this man, who is already rich, is *only getting richer*, for his wealth has become self-generating beyond what he can either consume or capitalize. Despite this abundance, his desire to see himself and his successes reflected in his labors blinds him to his fortune and keeps him from the true source of blessing and fulfillment. In a fit of busy-ing and selfish madness, he "pull[s] down [his] barns and build[s] larger ones [to] store all [his] grain and goods."<sup>xv</sup>

In the punchline of the story, God admonishes the man, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"<sup>xvi</sup> At the parable's close, Jesus clarifies, "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."<sup>xvii</sup>

In his memoirs, John Alfred Brashear tells the story of that fateful night when he dropped his first glass. He recounts putting his head in his hands there at the kitchen table and sobbing aloud, "What have I done? And what are we going to do?" And he tells of Phoebe setting a hand on his shoulder and saying, "We're going to buy another glass." And so they did.

For two more years they polished, until they had finally finished this new refractor, even better than the first. Indeed, they brought the lens to Dr. Langley at the observatory, who declared it the finest he had ever seen. According to Brashear's biography, he "began to make reflectors for others, and then, timidly at first but with increasing confidence, he undertook to make and sell small refractors.

"All this was done [after] long and [exhausting] duties in the mill. [Unsurprisingly, Brashear's] health broke down and [his physician ordered him] to give up [either] the telescopes or his work at the mill. Had such an alternative been presented to him a few years earlier, he would have had no real choice but should have been compelled to give up his optical work ... [H]owever, [he had attracted] the interest of" William Thaw, "probably the wealthiest man of his day in western Pennsylvania," and Thaw advanced John Alfred the capital necessary to build the Brashear Optic Company and, later, the Brashear Instrument Company.<sup>xviii</sup>

Using the Brashear method, as it became to be known, these firms produced and contributed to instruments around the world, devices that led to the most significant discoveries in physics and astronomy at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These advances contribute to our everyday life even now, from the precise counting of time by more precisely measuring stars across the meridian of the night sky, to Einstein's developing the theory of relativity.<sup>xix</sup>

Having seen beyond the struggle of a grievous moment – and choosing instead to gaze instead upon the cosmos’ depths – John Alfred Brashear died in 1920, and his ashes remain interred below the Keeler Telescope at the Allegheny Observatory. His epitaph reads, “We have loved the stars too fondly to be fearful of the night.”<sup>xx</sup>

Resonating with the “... vanity of vanities! All is vanity” of our Ecclesiastes lesson,<sup>xxi</sup> this morning’s Gospel offers reassurance in addition to admonition, should we have ears to hear (and we do). If we were to continue reading Luke, in the very next verse Jesus offers his disciples the familiar encouragement: “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds!”<sup>xxii</sup>

See, should fully dedicate ourselves to the glory of God and not to our own rewards, then the security and fulfillment we seek shall be accomplished, too.

As we ready to say goodbye to beloved ministers – continuing a pandemic-complicated season of bittersweet transition – we feel an entirely natural, soul-deep and whole-hearted ache. And carrying to our pews and to this chancel the glad occasions and undertakings we have shared with them, we want to memorialize those moments we spent together. Indeed, in our grief and in our anxiety, we want to build barns for storing and preserving those days ... to show others what we so enjoyed ... to assure ourselves and one another that what we have valued will endure and will not be lost. Yet, of course, to do so misunderstands both the source and the purpose of those fond experiences.

Friends, be sure that in God there is no shortage of belovedness for community! No scarcity of song! No lack of Spirit or joy! And we will best honor the faithfulness of these leaders’ ministries by daring pick up a new glass and begin our polishing again (after a morning of righteous celebrations, to be sure), seeing not only the treasured past reflected back at us as in a mirror, but seeing *through* those dear endeavors to the infinite reaches of God’s abundant Grace ... reminded that when all do is for the glory of the Holy One, then all we do shall be good and, indeed, *very* good.

For the life of the world to come,  
*Amen.*

---

<sup>i</sup> I keep a running list of sermon ideas connected to specific lectionary texts, and I found notes about Brashear’s biography in connection to this morning’s pairing of the Ecclesiastes and Luke lessons. As I hope my religious endnote-ing of sermons will testify, I am a committed to attributing the sources I use, and my “Sermon Ideas” file customarily keeps up with those references. Regrettably, I didn’t find the originating reference to this illustration. I googled until my keyboard wept softly, and I finally gave up the ghost. I guess I must have seen something in a film or on television? If anyone has read of Brashear’s story somewhere you think I might have come across him, I would welcome your wisdom! I’d titled my note, “One Glass To Save The World,” if that helps your recollections.

---

I did find a biography of Brashear in a 1920 edition of *Popular Astronomy*, and most of the details that follow in the sermon I drew from that article, published upon Brashear's death that same year. That reference may be found below.

<sup>ii</sup> Luke 10:2, from the lectionary texts assigned for "Proper 9, Year C," which fell on July 3, the Fourth Sunday After the Feast of Pentecost.

<sup>iii</sup> Luke 10:17.

<sup>iv</sup> Luke 10:19-20, italics mine.

<sup>v</sup> From the lectionary texts assigned for "Proper 11, Year C," which fell on July 17, the Sixth Sunday After the Feast of Pentecost.

<sup>vi</sup> Luke 10:41.

<sup>vii</sup> Luke 10:42.

<sup>viii</sup> From the lectionary texts assigned for "Proper 12, Year C," which fell on July 24, the Seventh Sunday After the Feast of Pentecost.

<sup>ix</sup> Luke 11:3, 11:9.

<sup>x</sup> Luke 11:11.

<sup>xi</sup> Schlesinger, Frank. "John Alfred Brashear, 1840-1920." *Popular Astronomy*, Volume 28, August 1920, pp. 373-379. [I found the article here.](#)

<sup>xii</sup> A good story I decided the sermon could not fit: Early in those steel mill years, Brashear took the necessary steps to become an ordained minister in the Methodist Church. According to the *Popular Astronomy* biography, the congregation's pastor was due to be away and asked Brashear to preach in his stead. However, the pastor's plans changed, and he was "one of the congregation that heard Brashear's only sermon. After the service he went up to the young candidate and putting a kindly hand upon his shoulder, he said to him: 'John, I think it would be a great pity to spoil a good mechanic for the sake of making an indifferent preacher.' Brashear went home with a sore heart, and according to his own account, he spent most of the night in tears ... Perhaps it will throw a little light upon the incident if it is mentioned that he had chosen the first chapter of Genesis for his text."

<sup>xiii</sup> Luke 12:16a.

<sup>xiv</sup> Luke 12:16b.

<sup>xv</sup> Luke 12:18.

<sup>xvi</sup> Luke 12:20.

<sup>xvii</sup> Luke 12:21.

<sup>xviii</sup> Schlesinger. I liked keeping the language here Schlesinger's, with my [adaptations] for tense and efficiency.

<sup>xix</sup> Another interesting detail the sermon could not hold: In time, Langley, along with Professor Charles Hastings, of Yale University, would become partners in Brashear's namesake businesses. Stirred by their collaboration, Langley would go on to build two manned flying machines, crashing the second only a week before the Wright brothers put theirs into the air. Indeed, the Wright brothers abided Langley's textbook for the principles of aerodynamics that ultimately lifted their plane at Kitty Hawk.

<sup>xx</sup> The Schlesinger article refers to this line as "from an anonymous poem called 'The Astronomer.'" However, contemporary sources identify it as a line from "The Old Astronomer To His Pupil," by Sarah Williams.

<sup>xxi</sup> Ecclesiastes 1:2.

<sup>xxii</sup> Luke 12:22-24.