

***Grasping or Grasped?***  
**A Pentecost 11 Sermon**

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-18; Luke 12:32-40

Sunday, August 12, 2007

by Dr. Frank Trotter

When I walked into this Sanctuary for the very first time this past February 18, I found myself marveling at the beauty of the place. Even though it was in the evening and there were few lights on, I could get a sense of the beauty of the stained glass windows, the intricacies of the wood carving, and the many fine touches that have comforted worshipers in this place for generations. And, as brand new pastors often do in brand new appointments, I found myself wondering how this congregation was established in this particular place, how it got here.

Several weeks ago I had the chance to read some of our history in one of our old church directories. Here's what it says: "After the very hard Midwestern winter of 1872, a group from Indiana sent four men to California to select land for a new community. Twenty-seven stockholders came by horse and carriage on January 27, 1874 to a Founders' day Picnic at which they divided up four hundred acres of barren ranch land. Seven months later a prayer meeting was held and eventually a Sunday School was formed. In January, 1875, a one-room schoolhouse was completed and the Union Sunday School and worship services were held there. In April, a Methodist class was held in which there were eleven members."<sup>1</sup>

Did you know that the first church was on Orange Grove by Palmetto? But when better roads and lighting began to become established here on Colorado Blvd., those first founders of this congregation put that one-room church on rollers and moved it to a lot adjacent to a livery stable at Colorado and DeLacey. (Can you imagine what that land down in Old Town would be worth today?)

By the mid-1880's the congregation had outgrown that location and made the decision to move to the corner of Colorado and Marengo where it really flourished for almost forty years. In the early 1920's, our foremothers and forefathers heard God's voice calling them to a new place again and made

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<sup>1</sup> "First United Methodist Church of Pasadena: 1875-2000" (125 Years of Ministry to Pasadena), 500 E. Colorado Boulevard, Pasadena, California 91101, p. 6.

the decision to purchase the property where the church is now located at the corner of Oakland and Colorado.

What kind of dedication did it take, do you suppose, to found this church? Or to move it on rollers to DeLacey and Colorado? Or move again to Marengo and then to this current location? How did the church afford the amazing stained glass windows here in the Sanctuary or the Louis Comfort Tiffany window in the Chapel?

Was it inspiration that guided them? Of course. Or sacrifice? Certainly, it must have been for only by drawing upon all of the resources and blessings that God had given them could our ancestors in faith have accomplished so much against such odds.

Journeys to new places within the kingdom of God lie at the foundation of our faith story. The author of the letter to the Hebrews tells us that “by faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old – and Sarah herself was barren – because [God] considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, ‘as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.’” (Hebrews 11:8-12)

I’ve recently read of several inner city churches around the country, including an Episcopal church in Newark, New Jersey, who have reluctantly come to the conclusion that the only way that they can keep their doors open for ministry is by selling their stained glass windows, in several cases windows by the firm of Louis Comfort Tiffany (the same firm that created the scene of Jesus in the Temple in the great rose window in the Chapel).

What happened to the inspiration that was surely present when those churches were founded? Is it a question of whether or not a church has served its purpose in a particular neighborhood and it’s time now to move on? Is it a question of whether or not the members of a church themselves

have abdicated their responsibility as believers in Jesus Christ and have fled for the suburbs when the tough times arrived?

Dr. Alan Culpepper, Dean of the School of Theology at Mercer University in Atlanta, suggests that faith is always lived out in tension between the vision of the kingdom of God and the temptations and challenges of the present day. He says, “If there are only two basic impulses, either to grasp or to give, then the alternative to anxiety over what we do not possess or control is to release our grasp of that which we do control... We can lay up treasure on earth or in heaven – but not in both places. The choice must be either/or – either our own advancement or the advancement of the kingdom, either earthly goods or heavenly treasures, either our own concerns or God’s.”<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Culpepper bases this argument on one of the more famous of Jesus’ sayings: “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

The question that both those who are considering founding a church, or maintaining it, or moving on to a new place is how to determine where heart and treasure intersect. Jesus, in a not very subtle way, suggests that the way in which we handle our material blessings determines where our highest priorities are, and ultimately, whether we are investing in earthly ventures or heavenly ones.

(Did you know, by the way, that Jesus talks more about money than any other single issue? He knows that a battle is being waged every day about where our heart is, where our treasure is, and whether those two are ever at the same place.)

Dr. Culpepper says that “faith in Jesus Christ awakens our consciousness of the spiritual dimensions of life. By so doing, faith allows and even forces us to see our lives from a new perspective...”<sup>3</sup> He argues that “followers of Jesus should be the freest persons – free from anxiety, free from the social conventions of materialism, free with their generosity to others. The lives of

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<sup>2</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, “The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. IX* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 260. Dr. Culpepper is the Dean of the School of Theology at Mercer University in Atlanta, Georgia.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

Jesus' disciples count for more than the pursuit of material wealth. They are devoted to higher things."<sup>4</sup>

That's the bottom line for us, of course. Does our faith in Jesus Christ free us up to see all of life from a new perspective? Or is our faith a faith in name only, making us really no different than non-believers?

Guess what? The church did not survive for 2,000 years without the dedication of those who were willing to sell what they had to move from Indiana or Pasadena, or to buy some rollers to move that one room church down to DeLacey and Colorado?

Guess what? The church of God has not survived for thousands of years without the heartfelt compassion of those who were willing to let go of their material wealth for the sake of those who have nothing at all – giving to the poor is what alms giving means.

Theologian William Loader says that these radical, provocative words of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke are meant to “set us free to deal with wealth creatively.”<sup>5</sup>

If you will, there is a great difference between those of us whose lives are spent in “grasping” and those of us whose lives have been “grasped by the Holy Spirit.” Do you remember the figure of Ebenezer Scrooge in Charles Dickens' famous 1843 novella, *A Christmas Carol*? Dickens describes him as “a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster. The cold within him froze his old features, nipped his pointed nose, shriveled his cheek, stiffened his gait, made his eyes red, his thin lips bluer...”<sup>6</sup>

What a difference there is between Dickens' famous portrait of a grasping man and the life that has been claimed by God! The human production of art in its highest forms could be regarded as an expression of the wonder we

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> William Loader, “First Thoughts on Year C Gospel Passages from the Lectionary: Pentecost 11,” <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/LkPentecost11.htm>. Dr. Loader is a member of the faculty at Murdoch University, Perth, Australia (the Uniting Church in Australia).

<sup>6</sup> Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, quoted at <http://theater2.nytimes.com/mem/theater/treview.html?pagewanted=print&res=9F03E2D9173AF932A25751C1A9649C8B63>.

feel in those moments of rare illuminating when we are in tune with the rhythm of life and infinity. All artists, writers and musicians have at times had the exhilarating and awesome experience of being seized with inspiration...

Dr. David Wong, professor of psychology and educational technology at Michigan State University, has written a thesis on what it means to be grasped, what it means when all of one's talents and abilities are suddenly in harmony with a purpose and vision. The word he uses is "what it means to be cool." Wong writes, "To experience insight is exhilarating as we feel that we are seeing something truer and more significant than before. Our ordinary experience sublimates into something extraordinary. Whether this experience is a brief glimpse, dawning awareness, or sudden awareness, it is sublime and cool... As Miles Davis is able to 'think better' when relaxed, so too can we perform a high level when we are cool... I assert that students do have an inclination toward this kind of 'cool' experience. The cool experience of performing smoothly as part of ensembles such as choirs, orchestras, sports teams, theater groups, and so on... More generally, they have all experienced 'flow,' the optimal experiences...that come with deep engagement. In these flow experiences, athletes, musicians, artists, and, yes, scientists report that the conscious boundary between themselves and the world is replaced by a powerful sense of connectedness and harmony."<sup>7</sup>

Some of us know that our Church Council is in the preliminary steps of forming a new "vision committee" – inspired in part by conversations at a Council retreat this past June. While the committee's work has not even yet begun, its task will be to dream big, to ask for the Holy Spirit's guidance as we seek to hear God's voice in a new day. What do you think might happen here at First United Methodist Church if our hearts and treasures came together around a clearly defined vision?

The author of the letter of Hebrews reminds us: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible..."

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<sup>7</sup> E. David Wong, "The Rebirth of Cool: Toward a Science Sublime," <http://www.msu.edu/~dwong/publications/Sublime-JAE.doc>. Dr. Wong is an associate professor in the program of Educational Psychology and Educational Technology in the College of Education at Michigan State University.

The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard said: “To dare is to lose one’s footing momentarily... To not dare is to lose oneself.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.