

Ministering to the Rich and Needy, etc.

Luke 16, 19-31

A Pentecost 18 Sermon

Sunday, September 30, 2007

by Dr. Frank Trotter

Do you believe in coincidence?

As a good cross word puzzle fan, I'm always looking for new words. While I was working on this sermon, I came across one I don't recall ever knowing before: "chiastic" –referring to things that overlap or intertwine.

Shortly after I woke up this morning around 5:00 a.m., the radio came on and I found myself listening to an NPR interview with billionaire Chuck Feeney, a 76-year-old philanthropist who has been known until now for his reluctance to step into the public spotlight. As the founder of Duty Free Shoppers, the world's largest duty-free retail chain, Feeney was once considered one of the 25 richest men alive – that is, until he began to give his money away. In 1987 he transferred all of his wealth to his foundation, The Atlantic Philanthropies, when the lessons that his parents taught him began to become evident – that life only has ultimate meaning when one uses blessings to help other people. He's the subject of a new biography entitled, *The Billionaire Who Wasn't: How Chuck Feeney Secretly Made and Gave Away a Fortune*. When asked why he's decided to "go public," he said, "It's a time and tide thing. I'm not getting any younger, and I thought there would be some advantage to talking about giving while living"¹

Do you believe in coincidence? Have you ever used the word "chiastic" in a sentence?

When I arrived at the church at 20 minutes until 6:00 this morning, I found myself fumbling with my keys to open up the door next to the parking lot. Unable to see the door lock in the dark, I had to set my coffee down and unfortunately work up one of our homeless men who often sleep up against our church walls every night of the year. His name is John Huston and I had met him several nights ago when I walked over to introduce myself. This morning, as I was fumbling in the dark, John said, "Good morning,

¹ "Reclusive Philanthropist Steps Into Spotlight," *Weekend Edition Sunday*, National Public Radio, Sunday, September 30, 2007, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=14749316>.

Reverend. When I saw your sermon title on the sign out in front of the church this week, I was very touched.”

Now I need to tell you that more than a little disconcerting, especially because the encounter felt like it could have come directly from the pages of this morning’s lesson from the Gospel of Luke.

One day Jesus tells the crowd a parable. “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table...” Now, I’m not wearing purple and fine linen, but this stole I’m wearing was fairly expensive. It made me more than a little uncomfortable to stumble into church in the dark wondering if God was sending me a message (and perhaps you, too!).

Biblical scholar Dr. Alan Culpepper suggests that the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus consists of a “drama in three acts.”² He says, “In the first act, the rich appear to be rich, and the poor appear to be poor”³ – it is a “tableau” that describes what a vast difference there is between these two men.

In the second act, the lives of both men suddenly come to an end. When the poor man dies, he is carried by the angels to be with Abraham; but when the rich man dies, he is carried to Hades where he lives in torment. In Dr. Culpepper’s words, “In [this] act, the rich become poor and the poor become rich. The structure is chiasmic, hinting that the fates of these two who lived such separate lives in reality intertwine.”⁴

(There it is! Did you hear the word “chiasmic”? That’s where I got it, direct from God to me to you from the pages of *The New Interpreter’s Bible*.)

The overlapping of the lives of these two men becomes evident in the third act when their earthly lives and eternal lives are seen in divine perspective. Lazarus dies and is carried by the angels to the bosom of Abraham was

² R. Alan Culpepper, “The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. IX (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 316. Dr. Culpepper is the Dean of the School of Theology at Mercer University in Atlanta, Georgia.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

“regarded as the place of highest bliss.”⁵ Surprisingly, the rich man dies soon afterwards; but in his case, he ends up in Hades, a place of eternal torment.

Culpepper says, “To many who heard the parable, this turn of events would have come as a surprise, for it was believed that blessings in this life were a sign of God’s favor, while illness, poverty, and hardship were signs of God’s displeasure. A just god would not do otherwise. How could a beggar go to heaven?”⁶

Realizing how dire his situation has become, the rich man makes his case to Abraham. “Father Abraham,” he cries out, “have mercy on me and have Lazarus dip the tip of his finger and water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony with these flames.” But Abraham responds by pointing out the interrelatedness of the lives of the rich man and the poor man while they were alive and now in the afterlife.

Dr. Culpepper shares a humorous insight by reminding us that “Clarence Jordan, who retold the parables and other parts of the NT in the idiom of the American Old South, interpreted Abraham’s answer insightfully: ‘Lazarus ain’t gonna run no mo’ yo’ errands, rich man.’”⁷

The rich man cries out again, “Then Father Abraham send Lazarus to my five brothers that they may be warned, so as not to fall into this place of torment.” But Abraham says, “Don’t they have the words of Moses and the prophets? Don’t they know the scripture where Moses says, ‘Do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor?’” And the rich man finally has a word of confession – not on his own behalf directly, but on behalf of his siblings. He says, “No, Father Abraham” – “[conveying] his despair that his brothers will heed the scriptures.”⁸

Then he makes his final appeal: “But if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.” Abraham says, “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”

⁵ Ibid., 317.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 318.

⁸ Ibid.

Closed book? End of the story? Is it Jesus' intent to tell us that there is no hope for those of us who are overly identified with the aloof, detached man of wealth? Certainly not. If that should be true, then how would the kingdom of God ever grow? Jesus knows that there is always hope for those who listen to his parables and are moved to reconsider the direction of their lives.

Dr. Culpepper says, "By the end of the parable we realize that we stand in the place of the brothers, and the question is whether we will hear the Scriptures and repent... Do the [rich man's] brothers ever get the message? We are not told, for that is the question the parable leaves us to answer. Each of us will have to write our own ending to the story."⁹

The parables of Jesus are chiasmic. They are about interconnectedness. You can't preach about ministering to the needy, for example, unless you also preach about ministering to the rich. You can't preach about ministering to those who have no social standing unless you preach about ministering to those who have the greatest social standing. The way the kingdom of God works is to bring great need and great blessings into relationship with each other and then step back to see what will happen. Jesus invites those of us who hold the keys to most of life's doors into relationship with those on the other side of the door who have no keys and no access. Even a closed door implies the possibility of relationship between those on either side.

Alan Culpepper puts it this way: "'Fundamental neighborliness,' therefore, is the barometer of the soul, an indication of the attitude of one's heart that is prized in the sight of God."¹⁰

There are so many stories of the franchised and the disenfranchised. Ken Burns' new film on PBS, "The War," had great ratings last Sunday night and has been widely praised, but it is being critiqued by many in the Latino community for being too narrow in its depiction of the ethnic complexion of American soldiers in World War II.¹¹ They're asking why the Latinos aren't even in the picture.

⁹ Ibid., 319.

¹⁰ Ibid., 320.

¹¹ "'The War' Neglects Latino Stories, Cartoonist Says," *Talk of the Nation*, National Public Radio, Monday, September 24, 2007, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=14658074>.

This week the U. S. Senate passed a bill which would enlarge the picture of who's included. In an amendment to the defense spending bill, the Senate votes to widen federal hate crime legislation by adding "sexual orientation" to the list of those who are already covered by the existing law. If approved by the House of Representatives and signed by the president, the legislation would be named for Matthew Shepard, the gay Wyoming college student who was found beaten to death nine years ago.

In a separate action, the Senate reauthorized the State Children's Health Insurance Program, also known as SCHIP. Although it is a very popular bill among both Republican and Democratic voters according to recent polls, the president has threatened to veto it as being too expensive and taking the country in the direction of "government-run health care" or socialized medicine.¹² The irony for many Americans is that the cost of the bill is a drop in the bucket compared to the administration's new request for additional supplemental funding for the war in Iraq.

One hundred and forty-five years ago on September 22, 1862, President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation which declared that all slaves in rebel states would be free effective January 1, 1863. By war's end, more than more than 500,000 slaves had fled to freedom behind Northern lines. A few months before he died, Lincoln said, "[The Emancipation Proclamation] is the central act of my administration, and the great event of the 19th century."¹³

The Emancipation Proclamation is almost always at his permanent home in the National Archives in Washington, D.C., but it was recently displayed for four days at the Clinton Library in Little Rock, Arkansas¹⁴ to mark the 50th anniversary of the desegregation of Central High School – another famous story in history where lives at the opposite end of the spectrum became intertwined.

On September 2, 1957, the night before school was to start Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus received word that the parents of 9 African-

¹² Robert Pear, "Senate Passes Children's Health Plan," *New York Times*, Friday, September 28, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/28/washington/28health.html>.

¹³ "Lincoln's Signature on the Emancipation Proclamation – National Archives," The White House Historical Association, http://www.whitehousehistory.org/04/subs/04_b_1863.html.

¹⁴ "Emancipation Proclamation on tour," Nationline, *USA Today*, Monday, September 24, 2007, 3A, http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2007-09-23-emancipationproclamation_N.htm?csp=34.

American children intended to enroll their children on the following day. In response, he called out the state's National Guard to surround Central High to prevent any black students from entering – claiming that he was only trying to protect citizens and property from possible violence by protesters who, he claimed, were headed toward Little Rock.

These 9 young men and women were kept home for three weeks. When school resumed on Monday, September 23, Central High was surrounded by Little Rock policemen and over 1,000 demonstrators as the young students were quietly escorted in a side door at the time class were scheduled to begin. When the demonstrators learned that the black youth were inside, they began to challenge the police and surge toward the school with shouts and threats. Fearful the police would be unable to control the crowd, the school administration moved the black students out a side door before noon.

Where are the Little Rock Nine today? Ernest Green, the first black student to graduate from Central High School, served as Assistant Secretary of Housing and Urban Affairs under President Jimmy Carter. Elizabeth Eckford made a career of the U.S. Army and is now a part-time social worker. Jefferson Thomas is now an accountant with the U.S. Department of Defense. Carlotta Walls Lanier graduated from Michigan State University and now has a career in real estate in Colorado. Minnijean Brown Trickey was expelled from Central High in February the following year after several incidents including dumping a bowl of chili on one of her antagonists in the school cafeteria. Now living in Canada, she is the central figure in a documentary that is now in production. Gloria Ray Karlmark is now retired from a successful career as a writer of science fiction. Thelma Mothershed-Wair now volunteers in a program for abused women in Illinois. Melba Pattillo Beals is an author and former journalist for People magazine and NBC living in San Francisco. And Dr. Terrence Roberts is a clinical psychologist and teaches at UCLA and Antioch College.¹⁵ As a footnote to the story, you would want to know that Dr. Roberts and his wife, Rita, have been members of this congregation for many years.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great German Christian, said, “Every moment and every situation challenges us to action and to obedience... We have literally no time to sit down and ask ourselves whether so-and-so is our neighbor or not. We must get into action and obey — we must behave like a neighbor to

¹⁵ Adapted from “The Little Rock Nine,” http://www.centralhigh57.org/The_Little_Rock_Nine.html#LR9.

him. But perhaps this shocks you. Perhaps you still think you ought to think out beforehand and know what you ought to do. To that, there is only one answer. You can only know and think about it by actually doing it. It is no use asking questions; for it is only through obedience that you come to learn the truth.”¹⁶

A man is hitchhiking and gets picked up. His benefactor squeals the tires pulling back onto the road. The hitchhiker glances over at the speedometer. “Wow!” he says. “Slow down, you’re going 67 in a 35 miles per hour zone.” “Don’t worry,” the driver replies, “God is with us.” They zip through an intersection, not slowing a bit. The hitchhiker says, Look out! You just ran that stop sign.” Again, the driver says, “Don’t worry! God is with us.” Finally, after the driver turns a corner on two wheels, the hitchhiker shouts, “STOP THE CAR!” “Why? Didn’t I tell you that God is with us?” “Yeah, I know,” the guy replies. “Stop the car anyway. God and I want to get out.”

What is there to do in this place, this church in response to God’s chiastic kingdom? Well, I’m not sure what the answer is. But I’ve been wondering about all of that unused space on the third floor of our education building. I’m not asking us to do anything... Well, perhaps I am!

So let us be among the brothers and sisters whose stories are not yet ended, in whose stories there is still enough time to get it right. For the kingdom of God is truly overlapping as great need and great resources come face to face for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, quoted at “Homiletics Online,” http://www.homileticsonline.com/subscriber/illustration_search.asp?keywords=Bonhoeffer.