

Missing in Action?
A Pentecost 20 Sermon
Luke 17:11-19
Sunday, October 14, 2007
by Dr. Frank Trotter

What is it that will be remembered about us, when all is said and done? Are our futures fixed in place, or are there other possibilities?

Contemporary poet, Carl Dennis, writes in “The God Who Loves You”¹:

It must be troubling for the god who loves you
To ponder how much happier you'd be today
Had you been able to glimpse your many futures.
It must be painful for him to watch you on Friday evenings
Driving home from the office, content with your week—
Three fine houses sold to deserving families—
Knowing as he does exactly what would have happened
Had you gone to your second choice for college,
Knowing the roommate you'd have been allotted
Whose ardent opinions on painting and music
Would have kindled in you a lifelong passion.
A life thirty points above the life you're living
On any scale of satisfaction. And every point
A thorn in the side of the god who loves you.
You don't want that, a large-souled man like you
Who tries to withhold from your wife the day's disappointments
So she can save her empathy for the children.
And would you want this god to compare your wife
With the woman you were destined to meet on the other campus?
It hurts you to think of him ranking the conversation
You'd have enjoyed over there higher in insight
Than the conversation you're used to.
And think how this loving god would feel
Knowing that the man next in line for your wife
Would have pleased her more than you ever will
Even on your best days, when you really try.
Can you sleep at night believing a god like that

¹ Carl Dennis, “The God Who Loves You” from *Practical Gods* (Penguin Poets, 2001), quoted at “The Writer’s Almanac with Garrison Keillor,” Wednesday, 10 October, 2007, <http://writersalmanac.publicradio.org/>.

Is pacing his cloudy bedroom, harassed by alternatives
You're spared by ignorance? The difference between what is
And what could have been will remain alive for him
Even after you cease existing, after you catch a chill
Running out in the snow for the morning paper,
Losing eleven years that the god who loves you
Will feel compelled to imagine scene by scene
Unless you come to the rescue by imagining him
No wiser than you are, no god at all, only a friend
No closer than the actual friend you made at college,
The one you haven't written in months. Sit down tonight
And write him about the life you can talk about
With a claim to authority, the life you've witnessed,
Which for all you know is the life you've chosen.

The poem is evocative in several respects, certainly in inviting us to wonder about the decisions we have made in the past in comparison to other choices we might have made instead. And if we wonder about “alternate pasts,” it is not a big leap to find ourselves wondering about “alternate futures” – wondering, in essence, about how the totality of our lives will be remembered.

Much attention has been paid in the past few days to the recent story of Al Gore being named as this year's recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize. Who would have thought that a man who lost the presidency in the most controversial election in U.S. history, a man who seemed to disappear for several years after his defeat would be where he is today. David Rothkopf, quoted by Pulitzer Prize winning columnist Thomas L. Friedman in this morning's *New York Times*, says, “No matter what happens, sooner or later character in leadership is revealed... Gore lost the election and had to figure out what to do with the rest of his life. He took the initiative to get the country and the world to focus on a common threat — climate change.”²

In reflecting on the opportunity for leadership that the crisis of 9/11 presented President Bush, Friedman makes a very controversial claim in this morning's paper. He says, “Never has so much national unity — which could have been used to develop a real energy policy, reverse our coming

² Thomas L. Friedman, “Who Will Succeed Al Gore?”, *New York Times*, Sunday, October 14, 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/14/opinion/14friedman.html?_r=1&ref=opinion&oref=slogin.

Social Security deficit, assemble a lasting coalition to deal with Afghanistan and Iraq, maybe even get a national health care program — been used to build so little. That is what historians will note most about Mr. Bush's tenure — the sheer wasted opportunity of it all."

In reflecting on Thomas Friedman's claim that the president will be remembered for missed opportunities, some of us may feel that the assessment is harsh and unwarranted while others may feel it is justified. But whenever we reflect on how others are evaluated, we are inevitably challenged to wonder what will be remembered about us when all is said and done. Is there an alternate future for us, or are we stuck in our own failures and missed opportunities? Is there time left to take stock and improve our performance?

One day on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus comes to a certain village and is approached by ten lepers. According to Jewish law, there were certain requirements to which anyone with a leprous disease must adhere. One of them was to live in a separate camp apart from the regular community. A second was to cry out, "Unclean!" whenever one with the disease came near to someone unafflicted. And if it should be claimed that a person with the disease was healed, he or she must go to a priest who would determine whether or not the claim was true.

On this occasion, the lepers keep their distance from Jesus and the disciples. But when they see him, they cry out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" He doesn't say, "All right" or "Be healed." Instead he says bluntly, "Go show yourself to the priests" — and, as they are going they are made clean.

Surely all ten of them must have noticed the change on the way to see the priests. Nine of them, however, focused more on obeying the requirement that they must seek out a priest than listening to the utter joy that must have been within their hearts on seeing that their skin was fresh and new as a newborn child's.

When the tenth sees what has happened, his joy cannot be contained. He turns back, praises God with a loud voice, and falls on the ground at the feet of Jesus to thank him. As Luke, the writer of the gospel tells us this story, it is at this specific moment that we are told that this man is a Samaritan — a man who, by his race, was considered to be inherently unclean.

Jesus looks around for the others who were also healed and asks, “Were not ten made clean? Where are the other nine? Were none of them available to return and give thanks to God except this foreigner?”

Biblical scholar Alan Culpepper points out the great irony that is being played out. He says, “Literally, the text says that the ten lepers ‘raised a voice’; they called out in unison. Later, their response to the healing will stand in sharp contrast to their unison at this point.”³ In other words, if all ten were unified in appealing for help, nine of them are not unified in their astounding absence and their silence. Missing in action, indeed!

The story ends when Jesus turns to the Samaritan and says, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.” Dr. Culpepper says, “The man’s faith was not expressed by his request for help but by his gratitude and praise of God. The other nine had been healed, but only this one received Jesus’ declaration of salvation. They got what they wanted, but this one received more than he had dreamed of asking for.”⁴

Each time I hear this story, I am reminded of how easy it is for people of faith to slide back into attitudes of ungratefulness before the presence of God. We have been blessed in so many ways – and we take those blessings for granted. God is with us on so many occasions – and we hardly take an extra moment to give thanks for that divine presence.

Culpepper asks, “If gratitude reveals humility of spirit and a sensitivity to the grace of God in one’s life, then is there any better measure of faith than wonder and thankfulness before what one perceives as unmerited expressions of love and kindness from God and from others? Are we self-made individuals beholden to no one, or are we blessed daily in ways we seldom perceive, cannot repay, and for which we often fail to be grateful?”⁵

This time of the year is always an uncomfortable time for me as a minister because it’s the time when we take a look at our membership roles to determine if there is anything we can do to get in touch with members who are missing in action. Sometimes there are understandable reasons why

³ R. Alan Culpepper, “The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. IX* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 326. Dr. Culpepper is Dean of the School of Theology at Mercer University in Atlanta, Georgia.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 327.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 328.

some members are no longer here – e.g., health reasons, living away from Pasadena at such a distance that getting here on Sundays is no longer possible, or perhaps the decision to worship with or belong to another community of faith.

But there are always a certain percentage of members in any church who just become – let’s be honest – lazy in upholding standards of faithfulness. I don’t think that number rises to the level of nine out of ten as it does in this story from Luke, but it’s a number that always feels too high for me. When we contact these our fellow members, it’s always, I hope, with a sense of humility and not judgment in seeking to restore them to the active community.

The truth is that even those of us who are here more Sundays than not have a long way to go in expressing to God how thankful we are for all of our blessings. I must confess to God and to you that I must count myself far more often among the nine out of ten than the one out of ten in taking the time to thank God as a should.

Whenever we listen to the stories of Jesus, there is the possibility of an alternate ending. How many of those nine will learn to get it right? (“Oh, dear God,” I pray, “I hope that some of them do... Oh, dear God,” I pray, “I hope that I may one day be counted among those who do...”)

Perhaps an alternate ending with hopeful results might be triggered by a renewed awareness of what those who have gone before us in faith have done for us. Though perhaps best known for his novels, D. H. Lawrence, the celebrated English writer of the 20th century, was also a poet of a high order. In his short poem, “Piano,”⁶ he looks back in remembrance:

Softly, in the dusk, a woman is singing to me;
Taking me back down the vista of years, till I see
A child sitting under the piano, in the boom of the tingling strings
And pressing the small, poised feet of a mother who smiles as she sings.

In spite of myself, the insidious mastery of song
Betrays me back, till the heart of me weeps to belong

⁶ D. H. Lawrence, “Piano,” included in the collection *Good Poems*, selected and introduced by Garrison Keillor (New York: Viking Penguin, 2002), 55

To the old Sunday evenings at home, with winter outside
And hymns in the cosy parlour, the tinkling piano our guide.

So now it is vain for the singer to burst into clamour
With the great black piano appassionato. The glamour
Of childish days is upon me, my manhood is cast
Down in the flood of remembrance, I weep like a child for the past.

Last night I came to a concert here in our Sanctuary by the Philippine Madrigal Singers. It was a full house downstairs when I came in to find a seat so I went up to sit in the balcony. I need to tell you that the acoustics are phenomenal up there. To all of you who've been sitting up there and have told me how good the sound is, I get it!

The first selection the choir sang was entitled "Ama"⁷ by the 20th century Filipino composer, George Canseco. "Ama" is a musical setting for the Lord's Prayer and the word "ama" means "father" in Pilipino Tagalog. What I would say to you about last night is that my soul was exalted by the music, and especially by their first selection. As I sat there with the music washing over me, it seemed as if the very architecture seemed to enhance the moment – with the columns sweeping the congregation upwards into a profound relationship with the Almighty and the fabric of the ceiling itself seeming to represent the edge of heaven. In those moments, I found myself looking at my connection with God wanting not to be among the nine out of ten who walked away but with the Samaritan who returned to glorify God and offer the deep thanks of one's heart.

In her best-selling and well-loved collection of essays entitled *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard says, "I think that the dying pray at the last not 'please,' but 'thank you,' as a guest thanks his host at the door... The universe was not made in jest but in solemn incomprehensible earnest. By a power that is unfathomably secret, and holy, and fleet. There is nothing to be done about it, but ignore it, or see. And then you walk fearlessly, eating what you must, growing wherever you can, like the monk on the road who knows precisely how vulnerable he is, who takes no comfort among death-

⁷ The program notes from the concert read: "George Canseco was considered as one of the Philippines' leading song writers during his time. He lived from 1934-2003, leaving behind a pop-culture legacy unmatched by many of his peers. From his pen came hundreds of eternal Original Pilipino Music most of which were interpreted by the country's ace balladeer, Basil Valdez. This includes 'Ama.' And with this piece we lift up our voices and all our songs to Him who has given us the gift of music."

forgetting men, and who carries his vision of vastness and might around in his tunic like a live coal which neither burns nor warms him, but with which he will not part.”⁸

In a similar way, Alan Culpepper says the same thing: “Here is a barometer of spiritual health... For those who have become aware of God’s grace, all of life is infused with a sense of gratitude, and each encounter becomes an opportunity to see and to respond in the spirit of the grateful leper.”⁹

Is there time left to amend the direction of our lives? Absolutely. Grant us, O God, the will to do so.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁸ Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1999; originally published in 1974), 275-76.

⁹ Culpepper, 328.