

Sermons at Oak Grove

September 30, 2007

Luke 16:19-31

"You are My Witness and My Servant"

By Andries J Coetzee

Scripture Readings

Luke 16: 19-31

¹⁹"There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. ²²The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴He called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.' ²⁵But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. ²⁶Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.' ²⁷He said, 'Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house— ²⁸for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.' ²⁹Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.' ³⁰He said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' ³¹He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"

Sermon: You are My Witness and My Servant

Evan Silverstein ("The 'E-word,' God and the unchurched", in *Emerge* A Weekly Publication of the Presbytery of the Twin Cities Area September 20, 2007) wrote that; "In many mainline Protestant churches the "E-word" (evangelism) has seemingly replaced sex and money as the most unspeakable of terms, according to author and researcher Martha Grace Reese. The E-word makes some pastors cringe and leaves many church members pondering how and why they should share their faith with the unchurched, she said."

But, in all fairness, for us as Presbyterian it's not that easy. In one of my favorite *Simpsons* episodes, "The Treehouse of Horror IX" the Simpson family receives a visit from two big, green extra-terrestrials, Kang and Kodo. Upon opening the door Homer said: "Oh, great. Mormons" and Kang responded saying; "Actually, we're Quantum-Presbyterians".

I think this episode might tell us more about us as Presbyterians than we might think. With a name like “Presbyterian” it is not that easy to evangelize. For recent converts like me, “Presbyterian” is a difficult word to pronounce. It was not until about a year ago after being a Presbyterian for eight years, that Van Vanetta was so kind to tell me that I am saying Presbyterian the wrong way, it is not “terian”, but “teerian”. Now, facing problems saying it, just think how difficult it is to spell it!

On another level, I do think we find it difficult to do evangelism. As Presbyterian we are put off by the connotation of evangelism, with its historical heavy emphasis on personal salvation, imposing in character and set against the backdrop of the Evangelical belief system. On the other hand we tend to overemphasize the correct theology making it a debate in academics.

According to Shirley F. Clement ([General Board of Discipleship](#), United Methodist Church); “People are seeking a spirituality of journey rather than a prescribed set of beliefs. They do not want to be told what to believe. They want to hear from others how God has been present in their life journey. They may even long to be invited into the story of another’s life, hoping for a touchstone in that story with which they can identify.”

“However,” she continues, “for that to happen” we need to be able to identify how Christ has made a difference in our everyday living, our lifestyle, decision making, and relating. This is the story we have opportunity to share in our everyday living. We here at Oak Grove believe that we can provide a setting where people can “safely” begin to identify their faith story and be nurtured in the faith.

Currently our “Passage Team” in conjunction with Worship Committee is working on a Devotional Book that should be available around Thanksgiving, with contributions by members of Oak Grove. In this book we ask contributors to share part of their faith stories and how Oak Grove has played a role in their faith development. This morning we experienced two faith stories during worship by Dan Payne and Matt Elinga.

As Presbyterians we see faith as a dynamic journey, not static. There are many points along the way where we come to know God more and reach the point of transformation and conversion, turning in new directions.

For us this faith journey takes place in the midst of the community. “The congregation is the evangelist, a “body” that shares faith, hospitality, and invitation (Shirley F. Clement).” Thus it goes far beyond writing and sharing stories of our own personal faith in our daily living. It has to do with the whole personality, culture, and climate of Oak Grove itself. Our intent with the Oak Grove devotional book is that through the mosaic of stories, an Oak Grove story will emerge that will make us more welcoming and open to the diversity within our midst helping us to reach out to our increasingly diverse surroundings.

Most often people are invited to worship by persons they trust. But, what is their experience when they come to worship? We so easily assume that people know which hymnal to use, where to look for the various elements of the service, and what behavior is appropriate for different parts of worship. We

don't intentionally make visitors feel like outsiders. Most often that happens when we don't often enough look carefully at our bulletins or order of service through the eyes of a visitor.

Shirley F. Clement states "that most churches probably feel they are welcoming and inviting. The question to ask is, to whom are we welcoming, caring, inviting, friendly? Is it mostly to ourselves, or do we work to provide settings for visitors and others in the community where they can feel invited and welcomed?"

It is in answering this question, as to whom we are welcoming, that our Gospel reading of the day is very appropriate, one week before World Communion Sunday and leading up to Thanksgiving.

Stan Wilson, *pastor of Northside Baptist Church in Clinton, Mississippi*, wrote "The story of Lazarus and the rich man is a tale of haunting distance and intimate nearness. The rich man is separated from Lazarus first by a gate and then, in Hades, by a great chasm, but across the chasm he sees Lazarus embraced in the bosom of Abraham." "I long for such intimacy," he wrote, "but I don't know my neighbors very well, and they don't know me. The result is that we are increasingly fragmented from one another, and this fragmentation means I do not know the poor." ("[Great Chasm](#)," Blogging Toward Sunday, Stan Wilson, *Theolog: The Blog of The Christian Century*, 2007). As the rich man we sometimes unintentionally, but tragically overlook the heart and soul of scripture— we miss the story of God's deep desire to create a people of hospitality and welcome for the poor and the stranger (Stan Wilson:2007).

The faith we share will only carry credibility if it is in alignment with the lifestyle we live, including the ways we struggle with life decisions. Faith-sharing be it —personal, family, or congregational—is a moment of invitation and hospitality with God, of making disciples in grateful response to the love and grace God has already given us in Jesus Christ. Evangelism therefore offers the good news of Jesus Christ through the transformation that has already taken place in our own lives. It is then that the sharing of this transformation becomes invitational and not impositional (Shirley F. Clement).

Amen