
1 Corinthians 13:1-13& Matthew 6:24-34 "Stepping out on the Front Porch"
By Andries J. Coetzee

Old Testament Reading: Isaiah 49:8-16

⁸Thus says the LORD: In a time of favor I have answered you, on a day of salvation I have helped you; I have kept you and given you as a covenant to the people, to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages; ⁹saying to the prisoners, "Come out," to those who are in darkness, "Show yourselves." They shall feed along the ways, on all the bare heights shall be their pasture; ¹⁰they shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them down, for he who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them. ¹¹And I will turn all my mountains into a road, and my highways shall be raised up. ¹²Lo, these shall come from far away, and lo, these from the north and from the west, and these from the land of Syene.

¹³Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the LORD has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his suffering ones. ¹⁴But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me." ¹⁵Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. ¹⁶See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me.

New Testament Reading: Matthew 6:24-34

²⁴"No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

²⁵"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁸And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ³⁰But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? ³¹Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' ³²For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴"So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.

Sermon: "Stepping Out on the Front Porch"

Our opening verse of today has always made me feel uncomfortable, as it leaves me with a choice, and making choices is difficult for most of us. If you are anything like me going to the grocery store can be an agony because something as simple as buying bread causes anxiety...we are presented with so many choices. So in some ways, today's reading makes it simpler as it only gives us two choices God or wealth! The problem for me is, that I want God, but some wealth won't be bad either. One of my favorite lines from the musical, "Fiddler on the Roof" is when Tevya talks to God "Dear God, you made many, many poor people. I realize, of course, that it's no shame to be poor. But it's no great honor either! So, what would have been so terrible if I had a small fortune?"

Another reason this text is uncomfortable to us, is that preachers don't want to preach against wealth, because we don't want the people with money to get upset and leave our churches. One of my good friends in his last year of seminary, just after our study of "Social Justice", was interviewing for his first position in a very affluent suburb in one of South Africa's cities. For his candidacy sermon he chose, (and he did choose it as we did not preach the lectionary in the Dutch Reformed Church in those days), Matthew 6:24-34 as the text of the day: "You cannot serve God and wealth" ... needless to say, he did not get the job.

Where we so often miss the point with scripture, and with our reading of today, is that we treat the Bible like a sermon of the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, and we only show little clips of it, and usually totally out of context, on You Tube. Matthew demands from us, that we look at Jesus' words within its context and that is within the framework of the Sermon on the Mount.

After Jesus teaches us the Lord's Prayer, he instructs us on fasting (6:16-18) and then gives us some warnings about wealth (6:19-23); not to hoard up earthly wealth! (6:19-21) and also, that a greedy eye corrupts the whole person (6:22-23). When we then read about not being able to work for two bosses, it is clear that one of them is greed for wealth and possessions and the other, the opposite, is to serve God with its contrary priorities.

Commentators state that while possessions and wealth are neither good nor evil in themselves, one cannot be a slave to possessions and wealth and also serve God. No you cannot serve two masters ... we have to choose either God or wealth. This leaves us anxious, as we have needs ... our need for food, shelter, and clothing, our need for education and recreation, our need for, and for and for ... Add to this anxiety, our current culture of fear, of war, of living with orange alerts, of recession and rising gas and food prices and we are anxious.

So what do I do when I am anxious? I retreat and shelter myself to protect "my" interest and I keep to myself. Therefore, very symbolically, life in urban America has shifted away from the front porch to the backyard.

In his book, God Next Door, Simon Holt¹ wrote that "we are now living in 'privatopia' where everyone occupies their own little piece of suburbia and hides behind the roller door on the garage. Neighbors are much like rare animals - sightings are infrequent and when they do occur people aren't sure what to do. In earlier days the front porch was common - when houses had large front porches so people could hang out the front and connect with each other. When the pace of life was slower and people seemed to value the neighborhood." Andrew Hamilton, on his blog backyardmissionary.com wrote; "We live in the back yard rather than the front. Privacy has overtaken any kind of engagement."

Living in the backyard isolates us from our neighbors, and closes our eyes from their needs and our ears from their pain. It matters little if others go without and live their lives as nameless people, who are totally forgotten.²

¹ As seen in Andrew Hamilton, on his blog backyardmissionary.com

² William Loader, in First Thoughts on Year A Gospel Passages from the Lectionary
<http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/MtPentecost2.htm>

In the backyard, in the words of singer, song writer and theologian Bryan McFarland Fields³, “the world would have us believe that there is a scarcity ... that there is not enough for all of ‘them’ AND you and me”. In the backyard, “the world will keep us afraid so we’ll hoard it all’. It is in the backyard that we all serve wealth... anxiously hanging on to our possessions and wanting more and more, and very subtly, we choose wealth against God.

It is not only at our homes that we choose to live in the backyard, but also here at church, here at Oak Grove Presbyterian Church. We as a church community constantly need to remind ourselves that the church’s purpose in the world is not only love, care and concern for one another but also to participate in “God’s activity in the world ... by healing and reconciling and binding up wounds, by ministering to the needs of the poor, the sick, the lonely, and the powerless.”⁴

It is to us, anxious children of God, that Jesus is saying “do not worry about your life” because God is like a mother who is nursing her child ... God will provide. You do not have to deny your needs, you do not have to go hungry or naked, but as a child of mine I want you to trust and believe that I will provide. As a mother I cannot protect you from hardship or pain ... but as a mother I can love you and be present with you in the abundance of my Son and your Savior, Jesus Christ ... look, ... look, ... your name is inscribed on the palms of my hands. I will take care of you like I do for the lilies of the fields and for the birds in the air.

It **is** possible for us to turn this around! It **is** possible for us to live in a way that my needs do not always have to be met at your expense! It is possible that love and care can flow equally to us all, the “haves” and the “have-nots”, or is it as it has been changed in this country to the “haves” and the “have-mores”?

If we move, and reclaim our place on the “front porch” of life, our passion and pain will be where there is suffering and distress, we will see the needs of our neighbors and we will hear their pain. On the front porch we will see the truth that we rarely see, the truth of a God who shared himself with all, a God broken for all, a God overflowing with love for all.

On the front porch we can turn our eyes towards human need and find the love and support from our church community to sustain us. On the front porch we can stay focused on the faces that have nothing, the infrastructures that fail, and the systems that need to change⁵.

Commentator William Loader wrote⁶, that “these words are not a recipe for loners, but for people in communities which care.” And here at Oak Grove Presbyterian Church we do care! As a community, we know that we have enough hope and that we have enough love to share with those around us. In your bulletin you will find an insert with volunteer and giving opportunities to make a difference this summer in our surrounding

³ Bryan McFarland Fields, 2007: “All That Matters”. [sassafrasongs](http://sassafrasongs.com/) & Bryan Field McFarland

⁴ G-3.0300 The Church’s Calling, 2007: Book of Order, Presbyterian Church (USA). The Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (USA).

⁵ William Loader, in First Thoughts on Year A Gospel Passages from the Lectionary <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/MtPentecost2.htm>

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community, badly in need of help. This summer, as we gather, let's step out on the front porch as we do have enough!

In his blog, "Bob's E-Space" on May 9, our Interim Executive Presbyter Bob Cuthill, whom we all know very well, shared his experience of stepping "Out on the Porch" and how it expanded his horizons about the Christian Church, particularly in Minnesota, during two days of meetings⁷.

Although not very excited about the prospect of these meetings, he now admits he was wrong and considers them two of the most positive and meaningful days he has spent since coming on board as the Interim Executive Presbyter. During a lunch meeting with a broad spectrum of the denominational leaders from within Christianity, from Pentecostals to Roman Catholics, he heard a most remarkable story from a pastor from north Minneapolis telling about the ministry of the church he serves. Bob wrote; "This pastor made clear how we must take the church out to the community. Then he told how on one Sunday when coming to church he noticed a crowd on the porch of a house across the street from his Church. This was a "House of Prostitution and Crack." During the worship he told his flock he was not going to preach in the church today. He said, "I'm going to preach on the porch of the House of Prostitution across the street."

Most of his congregation followed him out across the street. When he arrived on the porch the "Madam" cursed him out. He went on and preached anyway. By the end of the service the Madam came out and was crying. Today the "House" is closed and the Madam a member of the church. "God makes a difference," is what he said.

God makes a difference! And, when we live on the front porch we can share that difference with the world, and make a difference of our own. God blessed us with abundance let's step out and share it with those around us.

⁷ Bob Cuthill, 2008: "Bob's E-Space". <http://ptcaweb.typepad.com/epblog/>