

Sunday, September 9, 2007

A Sermon Preached by
The Reverend Roland P. Perdue, III



You Got a Lotta Nerve!

Luke 12:13-21

You never know what's going on beneath the surface, what is happening behind the scenes. If you are a person who enjoys fishing, you wear polarized sunglasses enabling you to see a bit beneath the surface. But I know of no such useful aid to help us peer into the true feelings or motivations of others.

And so it is more than a little refreshing when you run into someone who says what he or she means and means what she or he says.

*You got a lotta nerve
To say you are my friend
When I was down
You just stood there grinning
You got a lotta nerve
To say you got a helping hand to lend
You just want to be on
The side that's winning*

Bob Dylan's song *Positively 4th Street* is an icy and sneering reaction to a friendship betrayed. It is an embittered indication of his feelings toward what he believes is really going on beneath the surface of a relationship. And in case his fair-weather friend misses it, Dylan invites him or her to stand inside Dylan's skin, to wear his shoes, for just one time.

*I wish that for just one time
You could stand inside my shoes
And for just that moment
I could be you
Yes, I wish that for just one time
You could stand inside my shoes
You'd know what a drag it is
To see you*

Christopher Ricks, a literary and poetry critic of note, compares Dylan's poem to the poignancy of some of Thomas Hardy's poems, especially *The Voice*. To those who do not care for Dylan, or who think him less than a compelling poet, the comparison seems a bit of a stretch. (*Dylan's Visions of Sin*, p. 62-63). Well, maybe.

However, I think we can faithfully and, perhaps a bit shockingly I hope, compare *Positively 4th Street* to this morning's Gospel lesson and to the words of Jesus. You just never know what is going on beneath the surface, behind the scenes, do you? And what is happening in both Dylan's poetic music and Jesus' parabolic and subversive action is filled with poignancy.

On the surface, center stage: here is a hardworking, wise, and successful farmer or businessperson. There is no indication that he cheats, takes unfair advantage of tax laws, uses and therefore misuses illegal or legal immigrants or does not pay his workers adequately. On the surface, he is faced with a straight-forward business decision. He has to decide to stay a small farmer or become a larger farmer. He makes the choice and he builds bigger barns to care for his dramatic increase in produce. Churches face the same kind of issue. Do crowds then mean crowds now? Does the church need more staff and more programs? Is the core of the current membership committed to the point of radical stewardship?

Is bigger better, or is less more? Neither is the issue here. He makes a decision and acts on it. Our two older sons are driven by entirely different sets of ambitions. Neither is more ambitious than the other. Their ambitions, however, are very different. One works for himself – is self employed and believes he would be miserable working for someone else. The other works for a large pharmaceutical corporation. It is not a case of less or more ambition, just different ambitions. Larger churches can do things smaller churches cannot do. But, likewise, smaller churches can do things larger churches cannot. Numerical growth is more a matter of demographics than of dedication to spreading the Good News these days, especially in well-defined and established locations and townships.

And even here in this magnificent city, location is a key. Our location compels that Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church provide a varied and multifaceted

ministry meaningful to members, to tourists and to habitual visitors all at the same time. And that is why more and more pastors are much more interested in the vision and mission that drives a church than its former size, its past history or supposed reputation. Bigger or smaller barns, warehouses, sanctuaries or endowments may trouble us, keep us awake at night, and dominate our committee meetings and conversations. However, none of that is the issue with this man of the parable.

What then? Plunge beneath the surface, look behind the bigger barns and the man is simply a fool! He is a drag to be with, to meet on the street, to have a cup of coffee with; he is a fool! That's it. That is what's wrong. All this person can talk about is money, money, money. It dominates, controls his life. And this is not merely a casual opinion, nor is it necessarily our personal opinion of this man. It is Jesus who says, "God!" My goodness! Jesus says, "God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' "

The man is a fool, a stupid fool. So is the man who refuses to share the family's inheritance with his younger brother which provides the context of this parable. As the ancient psalm puts it, "The fool has said in his heart, there is no God" (Psalm 14:1). So the fool does his or her planning without regard to God, without an eye turned toward God and the rest of God's children. The word "fool" is used in scripture to signify an "empty person." So the "fool" plans for himself alone with no regard for God or anyone else. He or she prays only to themselves. The parable is crafted by a master story-teller: "Then I'll say to myself, 'Self (Soul), you've done well. You're got it made and can now retire. Take it easy and have the time of your life'" (Eugene Peterson's translation). Eat, drink, and be merry!

He is an "empty person," a "hollow man" stuffed not with the straw of T. S. Eliot's famous poem, but rather with the possessions he thinks he actually possesses. He does not know that the only thing you really own is what you are willing to share, to give away in radical (as in "basic") stewardship.

He's got a lotta nerve, and very little else beneath the surface, behind the scenes! And there is a little word that Jesus employed in the parable that provides the key to what is going on behind the scenes – the reason the man in the parable is such an empty fool. Jesus uses a pronoun which is in the Greek translation but in very few of our English translations. We read it: "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you." But in the oldest Greek translations, Jesus says, "You fool! This very night they require your soul of you; the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"

Who are they? Better yet, what are they? They are the things he thinks he possesses. And beneath the surface,

behind the scenes, they possess him. He is owned by what he thinks he owns. He knows the cost of everything and the value of nothing. He is an empty and stupid fool. I would not want to be in his shoes! Who would?

But who's to say that, from time to time, we don't stand in his shoes? From time to time, we all forget that Biblically speaking, things are good or bad according to the use to which we put them. Sex is good as our sexuality is put to good use and as an expression of tenderness and compassion – as well as passion and respect. Sex that is seductive or manipulative depersonalizes and dehumanizes. Any sex that is a "power play" is disruptive and wrong. Patriotism is good when put to good use and results in gratitude for our country and tolerant appreciation for forms of government unlike ours. Large endowments in churches are wonderful when put to use for staff, programs and preservation of the facilities as they are all involved in the mission of Christ. For observant Jews and Christians, things are of value according to the use, and not the cost, to which they are put.

And there is nothing wrong with wealth or success as long as we who are wealthy and successful use those gifts of God for God's sake in our families, in our communities and churches. Then, beneath the scenes and behind the surface, we are rich toward God with treasure in heaven.

Will and Barefoot are characters in W. Dale Cramer's novel *Levi's Will*. Will has survived a serious heart attack. He says, "But then one day you wake up in the hospital and it hits you all of a sudden that all the stuff you think you're accomplished doesn't mean as much when you're looking back as it did when you were looking forward.... You remember that stupid question Harm used to pester everybody with? The thing about the bus?"

Barefoot chuckles. "Yeah. A bus with nine persons on it stops and picks up two, lets three off. That one?"

"Right. And he goes through a bunch of stops, adding, subtracting, and everybody sits there counting fingers, trying to keep up with the total."

"And when it's over he says, 'How many stops did the bus make?'"

Will chuckles too. "Yeah. Old Harm. He never gets tired of that joke. But what if it's like that when you die? What if you get to the end of your life and find out you used up all your time getting ready to answer the wrong question?"

"How you gonna know?"

"Exactly. That's what I thought about when I was laying up there in the hospital. What does God want from me?"

Just beneath the surface, I am convinced God does not want bigger barns or bigger churches filled with “Self”. Rather God wants us to be filled with Christ, and to realize that our possessions often separate us, isolate us, from others and, therefore, from God! That is what’s going on in this parable and in our lives just beneath the surface, and unless we walk in Jesus’ shoes occasionally, we’ll never know it.

For Bob Dylan and for Jesus the message is unrelenting, hard hitting and directed right at us: either be stupid fools or fools for Christ.

Dylan puts it this way:

*You say I let you down
You know it’s not like that
If you’re so hurt
Why then don’t you show it
But that’s not where it’s at
You say you lost your faith
You had no faith to lose
And you know it*

And Jesus simply says on behalf of God:
You fool!

Well, which it is for you beneath the surface and behind the scenes?

Amen.

Note: If you were present in the Sanctuary when this sermon was preached or if you heard it on the church’s website, then you know that this may not exactly be the sermon you heard. This is a written sermon, and it is different in form and emphasis from a preached and heard sermonic effort within the context of worship. The various activities of worship – gathering, praying, singing, reading the sacred story together, participating in the holy drama and leaving to engage the routine events of one’s life – add to the overall meaning of the sermon.

Sermons are not written to be read. I write the sermon out as a discipline. However, when the writing is over, the work of learning the sermon is just beginning. As you read this and other sermons, your work is also just beginning. Having read the sermon, what difference does it make in your attitudes, actions and the adventure of living before God and others? Struggling with that may help actually “finish” the sermon.

Come and be present with us as we worship God in the Spirit of Jesus Christ!

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