

THE CONFIDENCE TO BE DIFFERENT Sermon for September 25

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Jeremiah 32:1-15

Psalm 146

1 Timothy 6:6-19

Luke 16:19-31

We're going to take a close look this morning at this unusual and, for many people, somewhat troubling story that Jesus told about the rich man and Lazarus. But we're going to approach it in a roundabout way, sort of like the girl who came up to her father one day and said, "Dad? You know that vase you're always worried somebody might break?" "Sure, Sweetie. What about it?" "Well Dad, your worries are over."

The roundabout way we're going to follow is one that runs first through the statement of faith that we developed at the beginning of this year when our church was going through its transition. What I'd like to do is talk a little about what it says and why we thought it was important to say those things, and to let the world know that this is who we are, or at least, who we are striving to be, and what we believe, what encouragement we offer, both to ourselves and to our community.

There were several reasons for producing a statement of faith, but I think it's fair to say that the principal reason was pragmatic. It's no secret that our church, like many others, is small and getting smaller. This isn't a rural versus urban problem, and it's not a regional problem, or a problem only for certain denominations.

Historically, most small churches everywhere have been sustained by the natural process of one generation succeeding the previous generation, so as

one generation departed from the scene, their children and grandchildren filled the pews.

That natural process has changed within our lifetimes, as young adults take advantage of much greater geographic mobility, and as the evolving nature of society offers many more alternatives for social interaction and engagement beyond the local church. Without going into details about this whole generational shift, the bottom line is that many if not most small neighborhood churches can no longer rely on the natural processes of replacement, but must instead look to methods of recruitment, of bringing in people to populate the pews who had no previous affiliation with the church.

As we all know, our church here in Gaines, like many, many others hasn't fared very well in this recruitment process, and the reasons aren't hard to find. People with children naturally want a church where there are other children; young adults want to be with their peers; and so on.

To put it in its most general form, our problem is essentially this: When it cannot realistically compete with larger, livelier and younger churches on any of the normal traditional grounds, what can a small church with an elderly congregation offer that will make people interested in checking it out, first, and second, that will keep them returning?

Sheryl and Jim and I talked about this at length, and we came into agreement that one of the things the church should and must do is to differentiate itself from other churches that people might be considering, and that the most available way for us to do that is to present a clear and distinct spiritual profile to the community. We wanted our church to be a place where a special Christian message of hope would be preached and manifested, a message folks might not be able to receive elsewhere. We want our church to be a place to which current members would feel comfortable inviting a friend or neighbor to attend, knowing that the church had something special to offer.

And that's why we wrote our statement of faith: Who We Are And What We Believe. So let's take a moment now and read it aloud.

Our church is Christ-centered and welcoming. Our welcome goes out to all who are seeking the love of God, and we extend that love in Christ. We believe we are all children of God, brothers and sisters with one another. Our focus is on forgiveness and relationship, not judgment. We believe in the universal reconciliation of all to God through the saving grace of our Lord and

Savior, Jesus Christ. We promote love, not fear, and we proclaim the faith that no one is beyond the reach of God's mercy.

We invite one and all to come and hear the story of God's infinite love and redeeming grace. As wounded and imperfect Christians ourselves, we welcome the confused, the lonely and those who feel marginalized. We believe in the power of prayer, the joy of good works, and the fruits of fellowship, in this life as well as the life to come.

We are a church of hope rather than of hardened doctrine. The foundation of our faith is the Bible, and we preach the Bible as God's living word, speaking God's personal message of hope to each individual.

For purposes of this morning's message, I'd like to draw your attention to two of the things this statement was written to emphasize.

The first is that we intend to be a church of radical inclusion. "*We invite one and all to come and hear the story of God's infinite love and redeeming grace. As wounded and imperfect Christians ourselves, we welcome the confused, the lonely and those who feel marginalized.*"

The parable from this morning's gospel reading makes it clear that this is Christ's message. The contrast in the parable is usually taken to represent a contrast between rich and poor - the rich man dressed in fine clothing and dining at a sumptuous table and Lazarus, a poor beggar with dogs licking his sores - and its moral message is therefore taken to be that we must be generous to those who have less than we do.

Yet while that is certainly a good Christian message, I don't think it's the deep message of this parable. I think the contrast Christ is most concerned about is the one between insiders and outsiders. This parable comes at the end of chapter 16 and concludes a whole series of illustrations Christ offers, a series that begins at the start of chapter 15 when he hears some Pharisees grumbling about him and saying: "This man receives sinners and eats with them."(15:2) We then hear about a lost sheep and a prodigal son and a dishonest manager who understands the power of forgiveness, and the whole section concludes with the story of Lazarus and the rich man.

The church - whether the universal church or the little country church - exists in God's eyes first and foremost to offer God's forgiveness and extend God's love to those who have never received them.

Gay and transgender folks may have trouble finding a church where they feel accepted: let's invite them here. People with addictions might not want to attend a church where they would have to worry about being scolded: let's invite them here. Poor people might be reluctant to attend a church because of that terrifying collection plate; people who've never opened a Bible might be afraid to come for fear of the unknown or of seeming ignorant: let's invite them here. Gypsies, tramps and thieves might be embarrassed to rub shoulders with their betters. Let's invite them here. Let's invite them all here. Why? Because here, *As wounded and imperfect Christians ourselves, we welcome the confused, the lonely and those who feel marginalized.*

The second point of emphasis from our statement is that we are a church that preaches universal salvation to one and all, that utterly rejects the notion of eternal torment. As we put it in our statement of faith: *We believe in the universal reconciliation of all to God through the saving grace of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. We promote love, not fear, and we proclaim the faith that no one is beyond the reach of God's mercy.*

But Preacher, what about Lazarus and the rich man, the rich man who can't ever get out of the fire and up to heaven! Isn't that Jesus himself teaching about the eternal torture of people who don't share what they have with the poor while they're alive?

No. That's not how God's love and Christ's sacrifice are understood from this pulpit, and therefore that's not how you will hear the Bible preached in this church.

In this church, you'll hear that even read as a literal account, there is nothing in the parable about *eternal* torment. If a bridge collapses over Oak Orchard Creek, you may very well say to someone on the other side, "You cannot cross from there to here." But that doesn't mean that you'll never be able to cross from there to here!

But in this church, you'll also hear that this and other similar parables should be read as parables, not as history, and that they should be read in context. You'll hear that the context of this parable, as we've already discussed, is Our Lord teaching us about the vital importance to the church of maintaining an openness and an outreach to everyone, how in some respects, that is the

church's most vital mission: "There is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over the ninety-nine who need no repentance."

The extremity of the rich man's predicament in this parable is not Our Lord's report on the consequences of failure to be generous to the poor. Would you throw your own child into a lake of fire to burn there forever for any imaginable reason, let alone not being generous enough to the poor? And yet we are asked to worship a God of infinite love and endless mercy doing that to His own children. That's literally insane, and yet that is what you will hear preached in many if not most churches..

No, in this parable Christ is not warning of unthinkably cruel consequences for our misbehavior. He is, as he is throughout this series of illustrations in Luke, demonstrating the centrality of inclusiveness and outreach to His message, and to the vitality of His church.

Later today Marcy and some of her friends will be offering a praise concert right here in this space. In the program for that concert there will be an insert, and on that insert will be a copy of our church's Statement of Belief, along with an invitation to stop by some Sunday morning. We wanted people to come and to worship with us, knowing that they can expect to find an attitude and hear a message of radical inclusiveness and universal love.

That's how the Bible will be preached in the Gaines church. And so after the concert is over, we hope that that's what you can tell your friends and neighbors about your church, your friends and neighbors, and maybe even that guy up the block with all the junk cars in his yard and who might have a drinking problem, or that niece who's been diagnosed as clinically depressed.

Let a thousand flowers bloom in Christ's garden!

And so, Gracious God, our prayer for this morning is that you let us reflect Your love, both individually and as a congregation. Let us add meaning to the activity of our lives, both individually and as a congregation. Give us the courage to be different, Lord, and the endurance to tolerate frustration. Grant us success proportionate to our commitment to Thy will. We ask all this in the name of Christ.