

Thomas R. Cook  
Sermon #460 Trinity Church – Swarthmore, Pennsylvania  
8:00 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist  
The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 30, 2007

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## “Get On With It!”

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Scripture: Luke 16:19-31; 18 Pentecost C (Proper 21)

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The late William Sloane Coffin once said that “Hell is truth seen too late.”\* Perhaps that goes a long way to explain the plight of the rich, well-dressed, well-fed man who shares the center of Jesus’ parable with poor, decrepit Lazarus. Lazarus, who spends his days amongst the dogs, lying at the gates of the rich man’s estate, hoping for some share of the slop which might be thrown out after the rich man and his guests have satisfied their voracious appetites. Lazarus, dead and gone to be with Father Abraham and receive the comfort he never knew in his lifetime. And the rich man, also gone to meet his maker, now tormented in heat and flames, a story to make our finest “fire and brimstone” preachers proud.

But apparently the rich man’s agony has done little to temper his sense of privilege, for even though he now must “fess-up” to the fact that his selfishness in life has led to his torment in death, he’s still looking for someone to do his bidding. “Father Abraham, send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue. Send Lazarus to warn my brothers not to be so stingy as I, so they won’t

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\* William Sloane Coffin, Credo (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 53.

have to endure this terrible agony.” What? Is the rich man still too good to fetch his own water or deliver his own mail? Doesn’t he get it? Perhaps the rich man’s problem is he never does quite see the truth, that for all the time he was given, for all the chances he had to make a difference for good, for all the means at his disposal, his #1 interest was, and even in hell remains, himself and his interests. Hell is, indeed, truth seen too late.

But don’t we sort of expect this kind of message from Jesus? *Selfish man bad, punished; poor man comforted after a life of suffering.* No surprise here. After all, this wouldn’t be the first sermon we’ve heard that implores us to give to the poor, to not be selfish, to use what we have for good, to share what we have with others. (In fact, I just preached that last week!) But maybe, after all, that isn’t the point of this parable entirely. There’s something in this parable that brings to mind the ticking clock with which each of us lives at every moment, something about it that sounds the alarm like the clock on our bedside nightstand annoyingly calling us to arise to our responsibilities all too early on a dreary Monday morning: *“Wake up, sleepyhead! There is much to do.”*

See, the problem for the rich man and the problem for his brothers isn’t that they don’t know the should do better. When the rich man asks that Lazarus be sent

to warn his brothers to change their ways, Father Abraham simply says they should listen to what Moses and the prophets have already told them, and what they had told them was not to be greedy and to look out for the needs of the poor.\* It isn't that they don't know they should be generous for the sake of others; it isn't that they don't know they should use their means for good. Their problem is that they don't believe it, or at least they refuse to accept what they have known all along, and so they do nothing about it. They don't lift a finger to make a change. The rich man, who even knows Lazarus by name, has apparently never done anything to help Lazarus out of his misery.

And then time runs out. *My goodness, look at the time! Where has it all gone? I meant to do something helpful, when the time was right...*

My brother-in-law is a builder. Works on everything from big multi-story office buildings to residential structures. And like me he was born and raised in Florida, where in the springtime you can most always count on plenty of rain to fall, usually brief showers, but hard, with lots of water and without too much warning that it's coming. So he grew familiar with a springtime builder's pattern: just when the drops start to fall, quickly gather up your gear and tools and power

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\* "Let justice roll down like mighty waters..." "Those who oppress the poor insult their maker (Prov. 14:31)." "Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land (Deuteronomy 15:11)."

cords and whatever, and get them and yourself under cover until the shower passes. Then it's back to work.

Now, as it turns out, my brother in law has become an Oregonian. He has lived for some ten years on the west coast in Portland, where it rains almost constantly during certain times of year. I remember him telling me how many of his ideas had to change, because in his early days on the job in Oregon, when he felt the first drops falling out of the sky, he quickly ran around the construction sight gathering up all the tools and the power cords and the equipment, tossing them under the shell of a building to cover them from the falling rain. And he looked out at all his co-workers who just stood there staring at him with wide eyes and questioning expressions, until one of them said, "What do you think you're doing?" And my brother in law stated the obvious: "I'm getting our gear under cover until the rain has passed and it's a good time to work again!" And the rest of the crew just broke into laughter, standing out there, rain coming down all over them. And then one of them said: "Son, if we took in our gear every time it starts to rain in this part of the country and waited for a good time to work, we'd never get a single building off the ground. Now get out here and get on with it!"

I wonder if living like a Christian is called to live isn't a bit like being a builder out there in rainy Oregon. If we all wait until we think it's a good time to get on with the work we know we are called to do, we may find, like the rich man in Jesus' parable, that our time has run out before we have gotten on with it. Maybe like my brother in law had to change some of his ideas on how to work in his new location, when we embrace Christianity, we have to change some of our ideas about what is important in life, if we think life is only about ourselves, or that faith is only about coming to church, or that other people's poverty and suffering have nothing to do with us.

And if we don't believe now we are called in some way to look beyond ourselves, what will ever make us believe? The rich man thought his brothers would listen to Lazarus if Lazarus returned to them from the dead to warn them not to neglect the poor. But we already have that message from the one we know through the power of Resurrection: Jesus. For us, living a generous life, a helpful life, becomes a matter not of information, but of decision. Shall we not look to get on with it before we see this truth too late? The simple message in Jesus' parable today is: the time is now!

If you want to talk about what you may be led to do in service to others through faith in God, my office is open. Just give me a call.