



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau
February 17, 2013

"Jesus Goes Hollywood"—Luke 16:19-31 (Gospel of Luke Series)
The Rev. Dr. Sim Fulcher

Last month I celebrated another birthday. I'm a digit deeper into the nebulous seventies. The day before my birthday I actually got out a pencil to double check the math to make sure I had the right number. That's how nebulous it is. All this demonstrates my deliberate inattention to another number rolling by. No doubt a little denial going on there.

I'm solidly in what Psalm 90 says is the extended warranty period. *"The length of our days is seventy years—or eighty, if you're blessed with an extended warranty."* (Psalm 90:10)

That's the Fulcher translation of verse ten. I looked at a half dozen Bible versions and I find the editors take a lot of liberty in translating that last line, so I feel I have license to do likewise.

By the way, how many here are in the extended warranty period? It's optional, but raise your hand if you are. Okay. Thanks!

You know, they say there are three ages: youth, middle-age, and you're looking good. I've been "looking good" for quite a while now.

And this is a good time to share some lines with you that I think are on target. They are framed behind my office door as you enter. I'm getting to the place where if I wait

too long either I, or these lines, will have gone to seed.

So here they are. It's a prayer, a famous prayer. We know it comes from the 17th Century, but we don't know who wrote it and we're not sure whether it was written by a woman or a man. It's long so I won't quote the whole thing—just the parts that speak most clearly to me, and maybe they'll speak to you "extended-warranty" people too. Technology has changed since the 17th Century, but human nature hasn't.

Listen to these words:

Lord, you know better than I know myself that I am growing older, and will some day be old.

Keep me from getting talkative, and particularly from the fatal habit of thinking I must say something on every subject on every occasion.

Release me from the craving of trying to straighten out everybody's affairs.

With my vast store of wisdom it seems a pity not to use it all, but you know, Lord, that I want a few friends in the end.

Keep my mind from the recital of endless details — give me wings to come to the point.

I ask for grace to listen to the tales of others' pains.

But seal my lips on my own aches and pains (unless of course if we are coming to the healing service tonight) For [my aches and pains] are increasing and my love of rehearsing them is becoming sweeter as the years go by.

Teach me the glorious lesson that occasionally it is possible I may be mistaken.

Keep me reasonably sweet. I do not want to be a saint—some of them are so hard to live with—but a sour old person is one of the crowning works of the devil.

Give me the ability to see good things in unexpected places, and talents in unexpected people. And give me, O Lord, the grace to tell them so. Amen.

What does all this have to do with the passage we just read from Luke? Just this: Jesus is talking about the most captivating, intriguing, yet entirely unexplored stage of human experience—life in the world beyond. We don't have to be old to go there but the older we are, the closer we are, and eventually we are all going there.

Life in this world is short. Life in the world to come is long. We do well to consider that world to come. But never fear! This sermon is not an exercise in geriatrics.

In fact, it's probably just the opposite. It takes aim where Jesus took aim and it wasn't especially at old people.

Jesus' aim here is among the opinion leaders—the movers and the shakers, the people who run this world, the people whose station in life keeps them far from thinking about the next life and the end of this one.

They are people for whom this world's values can so easily become the norm and the lines become blurred between what's real and what's fake. This passage is aimed at the Pharisee in His day, and in our day the Pharisee in all of us.

Jesus lived in two worlds. He always had one foot in this world and the other foot in the world to come. He was on His way to Jerusalem when He told this story. He knew His journey would not stop there.

He knew He was on His way to eternity by way of a cross where heaven and hell—good and evil—would compete and His body and soul would be the battle ground. It would be the Super Bowl of all the universe. The outcome could be triumph or tragedy. Yet, only a handful of spectators would be on hand to watch.

In the light of this eternal backdrop, the sham of this world no doubt appeared to Jesus for what it was probably more than ever before.

In a conversation a few verses back we find Jesus had just told the Pharisees they would have to make a choice. They had to either choose to serve God or choose to serve money; they couldn't do both.

We are told that upon hearing this the Pharisees, being money-

obsessed, rolled their eyes at Jesus and ignored him as being hopelessly out of touch. So Jesus gets pretty direct. He tells them they do a good job of looking good in front of others, but God knows what's in their hearts and it's not good.

Jesus loves these Pharisees. He knows they are lost. The sad thing is *they* don't know they're lost. If He could just get them to see the way things really are, then they might turn and give up their pride and embrace the forgiveness and salvation that He came to earth to give.

This is a tall order though—getting people to think about heaven and hell who never think about it—people who are too busy to stop and think and many maybe who don't even believe in any kind of after life.

How does Jesus attempt to do this? He doesn't have a DVD He can pop into His laptop. He doesn't even have a laptop. So Jesus tells a story.

But it's more than a story. It's a parable. A parable for sure but it's an unusual parable. It's the only parable where Jesus names the lead character. It's elaborate—a drama with two distinct scenes. And it's a dynamic parable with a person being tormented in hell.

Jesus is trying to give a wake-up call to his listeners—knowing that if these before Him did not hear, there would be many down through the ages who would hear this story and take heed.

So Jesus becomes a producer-director, and He is meticulous in detail. No phrase is wasted. Not because He wants to describe in detail the life beyond this life, but so that the story line will work. And

the whole meaning of the parable depends on the story line.

The rich man was not just rich. He wore purple and linen. That means designer clothes—the most expensive clothes money could buy. And the food he ate? Every day was a gourmet feast. Every day!

Lazarus is the name Jesus gives the poor man, but he's not just poor. He is sick. He's worse than sick. He's festering with ulcerated sores. And the dogs that come around and lick his sores are not just dogs. They are unclean dogs that run the streets like rodents spreading infection.

Lazarus was dumped on the rich man's doorstep. That means the rich man had to practically step over Lazarus every time he came and went. If Lazarus ever got a crumb it was by accident, because the rich never even glanced at Lazarus. He never even acknowledged anybody was there.

Lazarus was a nobody. If there ever was a nobody—a no name—Lazarus was that person. How interesting that this nobody, this no-name person, is the only person in all of Jesus' parables who gets a name. God does not play favorites with His love. God is love and every single person who enters this world matters to God, and He knows each by name.

That's scene one. That scene is in this world. Scene two is in the world to come.

For scene one Jesus didn't have to use stage props. He didn't have to use something to represent something else. Everybody knew about designer clothes, gourmet food, ulcerated sores, and unclean dogs. And everybody knew the feel of money and the pangs of hunger.

But scene two is in the world to come. Jesus sees that world ever so clearly. He came from that world. He longs to reveal that world to us who live in this world, but that world is so entirely unlike this world that He can't use anything from that world as it really is. We wouldn't understand it. In this story He uses stage props.

Angels come and get Lazarus and take him to Abraham. Everyone hearing this story knows Abraham is with God. So we are to understand that Lazarus has passed away and he is now in heaven.

Likewise, the rich man eventually dies. No angels here. He winds up in Hades. Hades is translated "hell" in most translations. If you study commentaries you will find where some say it means a holding area before being finally assigned to hell—like a person found guilty who is waiting to be sentenced. For all practical purposes Jesus is picturing the rich man to be in hell.

Now, after all this drama, complete with stage props, Jesus is ready to give the central teaching of the parable. And the teaching comes in the dialogue between the rich man and Abraham. The picture here that Jesus wants us to envision is a conversation between the rich man and God.

The rich man can see heaven far away across a great chasm and he sees Lazarus resting comfortably by the side of Abraham. He cries out across the chasm to Abraham.

The rich man is the beggar now. He's not begging for a crumb. He's begging for just one drop of water. He cries out, "Father Abraham please have mercy on me. Get Lazarus to dip just the tip of his finger in some cool water and come and touch my lips with it,

because I am tormented in these flames."

Abraham says, "The tide has turned hasn't it? Everything is reversed from what it was in your lifetime. Lazarus would have given anything for a crumb from you. But you didn't give him even one crumb. Now you would do anything for a drop of water from Lazarus. And he would gladly give it but he can't, because the great chasm that divides us can't be crossed by us or by you. It's fixed forever."

"Well, if you can't do that please at least do this", begged the rich man. "I've got five brothers. Send Lazarus back to my father's house to warn them so that they won't end up where I am in this place of torment."

Abraham said, "It would do no good to send anyone back to your brothers, even one coming back from the dead. If they won't listen to Moses and the prophets, they're not going to listen to Lazarus."

So that's Jesus' story—His drama in two scenes. What does it mean for us? What can we take away from this teaching?

Before anything we have to remember that this is a parable, and the general rule of parables applies. The purpose of a parable is to drive home one single truth. However, in order for that to happen there is sometimes a minor supporting truth.

Sometimes it's difficult to tell which is major and which is minor. A few Sundays ago we had the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Even though the main teaching point of that parable highlights the elder son, the parable is most known for the younger son and is even named for him.

This parable is like that. It has a major and a minor thrust and they both have characteristics of either title. But in order to see these more clearly it will help to first point out what this parable does not teach.

It does not teach that money is wrong or evil. It does not teach that having a lot of money is sinful. Jesus made the man in the story filthy rich with money as his god in order to support his story line. Money is not evil, but the Bible definitely teaches the love of money and the love of possessions is wrong and leads to all kinds of evil. But money and possessions are not evil. Abraham is one of the stars in this show, yet he was one of the wealthiest people who ever lived.

This parable does not teach that to be poor is to be godly. Nor does it teach that all who suffer will be blessed. We do know that hunger or pain of any sort can be used of God to bring us closer to him—whether pain brought on by ourselves (as in the case of the prodigal son) or pain that comes from simply living life. Lazarus in this story belongs to God because his heart is open to God. His name Lazarus means, "God is my helper". Jesus depicts him in total poverty to, again, support the story line.

This parable does not teach that hell is a fiery furnace. Other places in the Bible speak of hell as darkness and utter gloom. Flaming fire and darkness, of course, exclude each other. You can't have both at the same time. The flames in Jesus' stage props represent discomfort or torment of a high degree. A fiery flame gets that point across.

A helpful explanation of this phenomenon from my college days has always stuck in my mind.

Our InterVarsity Christian Fellowship team asked a seminary professor to come and speak on campus. We asked him to speak on the concept of hell. It was pretty brave and risky—particularly when your school is a secular university majoring in science and technology.

We had him come every night for a week and "Hell" was to be his topic one of the nights. We put up signs all over campus. I can't remember how we phrased it. "What is Hell Like?" Who would come to that, especially where everybody on campus was "a rambling wreck from Georgia Tech and a hell of an engineer"?

Whatever we named the talk it worked. The auditorium was full. Our speaker was Dr. Manfred Gutzke, former Canadian boxer; former school principle; former agnostic. He had double graduate degrees in geology and science from SMU and also double doctorates in philosophy and psychology from Columbia University, New York.

As he started his talk you could sense an uneasiness—a feeling that many students had come ready to shoot holes in whatever fairytales of religion this seminary professor would tell. That didn't happen. He did tell stories but they weren't fairytales, and a quiet thoughtful audience left the auditorium that night—some signing up to counsel with our speaker the next day.

One of the stories Dr. Gutzke told was of an experiment carried out in one of our large universities, I think it was Purdue, where a group of doctoral students were trying to determine with an accuracy not reached before: "At what point does the human eye perceive light?"

To do this they used a lab several floors below the surface of the ground where zero light would enter the darkened room. Dozens of students volunteered to come, sit in the dark, and record what they saw as a light source was slowly turned on.

The results were totally unexpected. Some saw the light slowly brighten as it moved across the room. Others saw the light drop slowly down. For some the light weaved a pattern. What amazed the students conducting the experiment was that the light they used was fixed solidly into the wall. The light was stationary. They had inadvertently discovered that the human eye and the brain to which it's attached, can't function without a reference point.

Dr. Gutzke said physical illness comes when we lose our physical reference point. We say we're seasick. He said he could not imagine the spiritual torment of going out into eternity apart from God—apart from the reference point for which we were all made and without whom there is an eternal existence, but not eternal life.

Speaking of eyes helps bring us back to the major teaching of this parable. Certainly it teaches that money can become our god and it can blind our eyes to the world God wants us to see and enjoy.

What was the rich man's god? Was it social status? Was it houses? Was it clothes? Was it food? Was it power? Was it money? Whatever it was it seems it was connected to money—something money could buy.

But this parable is not about money. Jesus used the hot topic of money to keep true to his story line,

but this parable is about where a person's heart is. And when a person's heart is wrapped around anything else but God, it's impossible for that person to love what God loves and hate what God hates.

When a person has a pure heart they begin to see things clearly as God sees them. *"Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God."* They see that if you want to be top dog, get on the bottom; if you want to be in the front, get in the back; if you want to find your life lose it; if someone wrongs you, bless them; if you want a mature faith, become as a child.

We don't have to go to the world beyond to realize that the values of that world are almost the reverse of this world we live in. We have only to give our hearts to God and this whole world becomes another place. We come to see it with childlike faith. The words of that hymn are true:

*"Heaven above is softer blue,
Earth around is sweeter green;
Something lives in every hue
Christless eyes have never seen."*

But giving our hearts to God is not easy—simple, but not easy. And that brings us to final teaching of this parable.

The rich man discovers that in this life he had no place in his heart for God. Now he sees things clearly and he humbly cries out for mercy but no mercy is given. It is too late. He learns too late the teaching we are given in the book of Hebrews, *"It is appointed for mortals once to die and after that the judgment."* (Heb. 9:27)

So he pleads for word to be taken to his five brothers so that they would embrace God and give God the rightful place in their lives and not end up where he is.

It may be the first time in his existence that the rich man has thought of others.

The response he gets is the kicker of the whole parable. He is told his brothers have already gotten word. In fact, they've had it all along just like he did. It's the word of Moses and the prophets. It's the Old Testament. He's told that nothing anybody can do or say will be any more inviting or convincing than the words they already have. And that is true for us, too, even though we can add the New Testament. The hymn says:

*How firm a foundation,
ye saints of the Lord,
Is laid for your faith
in His excellent Word!
**What more can He say
than to you He that said,**
To you who for refuge to
Jesus have fled?*

This book I'm holding has everything in it that we need to learn about how to live with God forever. "What more can he say than to you he has said."

In the parable the rich man missed out on life. He was caught up in the gods of this world while being surrounded by a beauty he never saw, and when he saw it in the world beyond he couldn't get to it.

The bottom line of this parable is this:

"God so loved the world that he gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life."

(John 3:16)

If you are not a believer in Christ, you need to know that God has done all he can for you to become one. The ball is now in your court. And you need to hit

It back in this life because after this life, the game is over. But God will help you hit it back if you'll just swing.

And if you **are** a believer in Christ but you've gotten caught up again in the value system of this world; you've wrapped your heart around someone or something that is not God; and this world for you has become an ugly place? Give God your heart again and change your world. Do it today!

I'll end with this short story. A couple of years ago our little Cocker Spaniel puppy had just gotten her lamp shade off her head from being spayed. She had gotten her final battery of shots and our vet had finally cleared her to go out in public. She was ready to venture into the world.

So I took her to Manoa Park. She was wide-eyed with excitement and shaking a little with fear. As we walked maybe 100 feet from the car, two little girls about six or seven years old ran up to us. They stroked her smooth hair and asked her name as we squatted there on the ground together.

I said, "Her name is Malasada. We call her Mala and this is her first moment out in the world." One of the little girls got very serious. She looked Mala squarely in the face so that their eyes met. She said, "Mala, it's a beautiful world."

It is a beautiful world. May God give us grace to have pure hearts and matching eyes with which to see it. Amen.

Let's Pray:

Our Lord, we know we shall pass this way but once. Therefore give us grace to show kindness to our fellow human beings.

Give us courage to make a mark for good in this world, and grant that Your will be done through us while we journey here, for we shall not pass this way again.

In Jesus' name and for His sake we pray. Amen.

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