

Living With Intentionality

Confirmation Sunday

Psalm 16:7-11; Luke 12:41-48

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

On this day, or as I contemplate this day I always think about these young people and some word to say to them and, hopefully, a word to them which is not without significance to the whole congregation. I want to say how impressed I always am on this day with our young people. They are wonderful kids. Well, they should be, they are yours, of course.

Young people, I am going to speak to you and then the other folks can listen in. What I really want to say to you is the consequence of what was happening some weeks ago when I was thinking about what the theme and text would be and my mind was filled with images of war and destruction and devastation, and the suffering and even the sight of liberation, tearing down statues and thinking about people who perhaps for the first time could open their mouth and speak their mind without fear of death. I was thinking about how much of the world consists of people who are living with suffering, tragedy. And then I am thinking about you and I am thinking you are the lucky ones. You know that? You're the lucky ones.

When I say that, I have to confess to you that I always use the word luck with a bad conscience, as I have confessed here before, because my father wouldn't let me use the word luck because you just weren't lucky. There was a divine providence and God had one's life pretty much written out, and so luck was not a word around our dinner table, and I admit luck is really not a word for a sermon, for a pulpit, for a church, for a Christian congregation. But then, I have never been tied by what is proper. You are the lucky ones. We're all the lucky ones.

I was delighted to find in Psalm 16 that in verses 5 and 6 the Psalmist speaks about God being his portion and he says, "You hold my lot and the boundary lines have fallen to me in pleasant places." Do you know what that is about? That reference goes back to when Israel entered the Promised Land and conquered the land and the Canaanites were there. It was one of the early instances of ethnic cleansing. When they got into the land, there were the twelve tribes and a couple of them stayed on the east side of Jordan, but the rest came in and they had to

divide up the land, and how do you divide the land? Well, at one point Joshua got disturbed with them because they weren't getting on with the work and so he called them together and had a couple representatives from each tribe and do you know what they did in order to determine who was going to go where?

They cast lots. Do you know what that means? They held a lottery. They rolled dice, in other words. Now, to be sure, they prayed before they rolled the dice, which I would highly recommend if you go to Las Vegas. This was a common practice. To be sure, they believed that in the casting of the lots that God's will was going to be executed. There is a verse in Proverbs, "Man throws the dice, but God makes the spots turn up." Of course, that is the whole thing about life, isn't it? Is it all prescribed? Is there a God up there who is playing chess with us, or are we lucky? In any case, you are the lucky ones. I was awfully glad I could use that biblical reference to the distribution of land through the casting of lots because that was a practice in ancient society. What it kept somebody from doing, some great skillful, powerful entrepreneur, was it kept someone from building an empire because, from time to time, in these agrarian societies in ancient times, they would gather the community together and they would cast lots so that you got that portion this time, you got that portion next time. What it did was create a kind of equality. It leveled everybody from time to time and gave everyone a fair shake. So, this really was a practice, and to be sure, there was a conviction to that in the biblical understanding of things, that this was the way in which the will of God was determined.

Well, that is a conception of God's involvement in our lives which is a little different than the one that I have but, nonetheless, that is what was happening. In any case, when that was over, you could say, "I'm one of the lucky ones." And when you say, "I'm one of the lucky ones," the thing that it does is it acknowledges a certain randomness about life, and everything we know about the universe today, our cosmologists, our scientists tell us that what has actually evolved and emerged in our universe, in our global reality, in our human story has an element of randomness about it. There could have been trajectories off in a thousand or a million different ways and, however it happened, here we are now and to say "You're the lucky ones," at least what it does is say everything that I have is not a consequence of my specialness. Sometimes religious communities think of themselves as special and then that can lead to an attitude of self-righteousness, although it is always clothed in a real humility. But, you know, if God is playing chess with people and if I am special, and God has really favored me, how do I explain all of those whose lives are filled with tragedy? So, I like to get off that and just say "Wow! Wow! I'm one of the lucky ones." Because which one of you young people this morning chose to be born? Which one of you chose your parents? Who of us chose where to be born, when to be born? When you think about it, you must have to sit down and be amazed, and then when you think about all we have, the blessings of our lives? That's why I keep saying until everybody gets tired of hearing it, all is grace, because grace means gift. It means

it is simply bestowed on us. Here we are, and I want to say to all of us this morning, we're the lucky ones.

I don't think anybody would argue with that, so then let me ask a second question, or let me make a second point in the form of a question. Given you are a lucky one, what are you going to do about it? What are you going to do about it? That's why I read the parable about the man who was a big problem because he prospered so much that he couldn't house all of his goods and his crops. It was occasioned by the question somebody asked Jesus, somebody who was unhappy about the way the inheritance was divided. Do you know how many families have had rancor and bitterness and brokenness over inheritance? Jesus said, "Get a life. Get a life! Why would you trouble yourself over how the split came down?"

And then he tells the story about this man who prospered so much that he had all of these crops and he didn't know what to do with them all. He said, 'Ah, I know. I'll tear down my barns and I'll build bigger barns.' And so he built bigger barns and he talked to himself, he planned by himself. Himself, he himself was the center of all of his concern and he congratulated himself and said, "Ah, now I have it made. Eat, drink and be merry. Relax a little, already." And in the story Jesus says, "A fool. Tonight it's a coronary. It's over." And he implies that while the man gained all of that, he lost his life, his soul, his being.

I use that story of Jesus to confront you who are the lucky ones with how you respond to the unimaginable good fortune you have to be born when you were born, where you were born, to whom you were born. What are you going to do about it? We could put that question to our whole nation and one of the things that concerns me about the way that this nation is being led today is the fact that we who are so wealthy and so powerful, who have just demonstrated to the whole world, if there was any question about it, that there is really nothing we cannot do or accomplish, and when I read the policy statements now in fact being followed, it sounds to me like what we have to do is step it up, increase, according to the blueprint, the military defense budget 15 to 20 billion dollars a year annually, while the education budget gets cut and while the road system and the infrastructure suffers, and old people like me about to retire don't have prescription drug coverage. That really worries me. So, we are dominant and we are preeminent and the thinking today is that what we have to do is work at enhancing our preeminence. Well, it sounds like building bigger barns to me.

But, I don't like to think about that too much. It's really an exercise in futility and despair, because I'm just an individual and what can I do?

But then I realize I am responsible and I have been blessed. I'm one of the lucky ones. What can I do? And it's up to just a lot of us to do what we can do.

I want to hold before you one of my heroes. His name is Albert Schweitzer. I don't know if you are familiar with him or not, but he died around 1960 at the age of 90, and this is out of his autobiography. He was a young man who grew up in a

parsonage in Germany. His father was a pastor. Albert Schweitzer, before he was 30, became one of the greatest world biblical scholars and theologians. He wrote *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, which is still a classic. He was an outstanding scholar. And then he became an accomplished organist. He studied with Widor. He became one of the world-renowned organists; he became one of the greatest scholars of the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. This guy, before he was 30 now. Now listen to this out of his autobiography:

Long ago in my student days I had thought about it. It struck me as inconceivable that I should be allowed to lead such a happy life while I saw so many people around me struggling with sorrow and suffering. Even at school I had felt stirred whenever I caught a glimpse of the miserable home surroundings of some of my classmates and compared them with the ideal conditions in which we children of the parsonage at Giinsbach had lived. At the university, enjoying the good fortune of studying and even getting some results in scholarship and the arts, I could not help but think continually of others who were denied the good fortune by their material circumstances or their health.

One bright summer morning at Giinsbach during the Whitsentide holidays, (it was 1896, he was 21 years old) as I awoke, the thought came to me that I must not accept this good fortune as a matter of course, but must give something in return. While outside the birds sang, I reflected on this thought and before I had gotten up, I came to the conclusion that, until I was 30, I could consider myself justified in devoting myself to scholarship and the arts. But, after that, I would devote myself directly to serving humanity. I had already tried many times to find the meaning that lay hidden in the saying of Jesus, "Whoever would save his life shall lose it, and whoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel shall save it." Now I had found the answer. I could now add outward to inward happiness.

He was 21 when he came to that resolution. He did continue his organ work and his theological research until he was 30, and then he started medical school, and he continued his other work while he was studying medicine and eventually he became a physician, and you know the story probably, he went to Africa. The rest of his life was given to the Congo building a hospital at Lambarene and serving the African people, for the rest of his life. His parents, his university professors, his colleagues, his associates, his friends said,

"Stupid! Why would you waste your life that way? Look at your education, look at your giftedness, look at your mind, look at what you can do in the world! Why would you go into the middle of Africa?"

But, he was undeterred and he did it. He has probably received every award and honor that could be bestowed on a human being in consequence and his life

continues to be a beacon light. Of course, he didn't come on it accidentally. As I said, his book, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, is still a classic.

He was convinced. He was fascinated, captivated, totally saturated with Jesus, and he changed his world. Not globally, but impacted it in such a way that we are still talking about it here, as we are still thinking about Jesus 2000 years later, because we are going to come to this table and the bread will be broken and the wine will be poured out, because we will remember that the cost of Jesus' way was his violent death.

And I invite you, the lucky ones, to come and take that bread and that cup, not so you can have your sins forgiven, and go to heaven, but so you can live the way of Jesus here and now, because taking the bread and the cup is an act of solidarity. It is the raising of a banner. It is the flying of a flag. That is what this is about this morning. It is a rite of Christian identity. You get your own candle. You have to go your own way now. Let me suggest Jesus, who will ask of you everything and in consequence, give you life.

References:

Albert Schweitzer. *Out of My Life and Thought: An Autobiography*. Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1933.