

Ron Gilmer  
8<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Year A  
University Presbyterian Church  
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*God of mercy, grant that the Word you speak this day may take root in our hearts, and bear fruit to your honor and glory, for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

## **NO DAY BUT TODAY?**

**MATTHEW 6:24-34**

Since God last gathered us to worship, I have been to the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, and now, I am home. Yes, Tuscaloosa is beginning to feel more and more like home to me. This marked the first time that I have left from Tuscaloosa and returned to Tuscaloosa without passing through North Carolina (talk about serving two masters...at least until Caesar jump starts the real estate market); and yet now that am back among you, I am bold to pray, "Thanks be to God."

The Festival of Homiletics is *the* big educational event of the year for me, and it was marvelous feeling to be able to introduce myself as the pastor of University Presbyterian Church in Tuscaloosa, Alabama (even though the thick Southern drawl seemed unsettling to some). Thank you for being a congregation who is committed to education, for being so open and understanding and for practicing what our Reformed tradition preaches: "the life of the mind in service to God." Sure, there may be more practical ways for me to invest the funds allotted for continuing education, and yet I am increasingly convinced that faith calls us to be spontaneous and adventurous, to do something daring---something drastic---like jump out of an airplane or go to Minnesota, understanding that God would not call us to jump out of an airplane without a parachute or go to Minnesota in the midst of winter.

Since you and I have worshiped together, I have participated in eight worship services, eight lectures and three workshops. The statistics would be gaudier had I not been led by the Spirit to the Hubert H. Humphrey Metrodome to take in a Twins/Rangers baseball game on Tuesday. What is a

preacher to do when the Spirit says, “Go,” and the umpire screams, “Play ball?” Final score: Minnesota 11, Texas 4. The natives were feeling it (even if they were not saying it), “Thanks be to God!”

One of the highlights of this year’s conference for me was being introduced to the preaching of Michael Bruce Curry, who serves as the Bishop of North Carolina. He served parishes in Winston Salem, North Carolina, Lincoln Heights, Ohio and Baltimore, Maryland before being consecrated as Bishop. His lectures are incisive, and his preaching is as African American as it is Anglican. He laughs at himself and at the Episcopalians in his diocese (only as he can since he *is* a bishop). He is subversive. He subverts his authority, the church’s authority and the state’s authority, and he cites the subversive nature of Scripture when doing so.

Curry’s lecture “The Power of the Dream” begins with an acknowledgment of differences in the Gospels. Curry says that each Gospel describes a particular part of God’s dream: God’s dream for the church and God’s dream for the world. Then he interprets these differences. Mark is a bare-boned Gospel in which everything happens quickly. Commentary is limited. Mark gives us everything that we need to know in charts and graphs and bullets. Mark is a first century edition of *USA Today*. John, who is less concerned than the other Gospel writers in providing us with an historical account of Jesus’ life, is more mystical: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...” John is the early church’s answer to *The New Yorker*. Matthew champions interfaith dialogue between Jews and Christians and promotes public discourse on law. Meaning: UPC, had we been around when Matthew was being published, we would be subscribers, because Matthew is an ancestor of *Sojourner’s Magazine*. In Matthew, Jesus proclaims, “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” In Luke, Jesus is much more radical. He calls out the extravagantly wealthy and those who abuse power saying, “Blessed are the poor.” Liberals love Luke, because, as Curry points out, Luke is *The Village Voice*.

When he said that, I thought about you. I thought about this sermon, because it was beginning to come together before I left Tuscaloosa. Then I thought, “Oh, no, why did you say that? Sunday’s

sermon would work better if Matthew was the Bohemian Gospel?" Sure, Luke is more radical than Matthew, but Matthew is one part writer and one part social activist. In Matthew's Gospel, the homeless are faithful, and the faithful are homeless (or at least are willing to be). Do not worry: about your life; about what you will eat or drink; about your body; or about what you will wear. Consider the lilies of the field. Consider the lilies of the field? The lilies of the field do not have mortgages. Oil prices do not affect lilies of the field. Lilies do not have sophisticated palates; their diets are bland. Their thighs are not thick; their abs are not flabby. Only the unmotivated, the uneducated and the dreamers do *not* strive for such things: Bohemians.

Matthew seems smitten by Jesus' inner-Bohemian, and Jesus definitely appeals to Matthew's. As a minor league theater enthusiast, this scene in Matthew conjures up images from *Rent*, the musical whose historic run on Broadway is scheduled to end this fall. The story is set in New York's East Village where artists, who are living in poverty, are given an ultimatum: pay or be evicted. That stress is secondary to the fact that HIV/AIDS pervades the story. Each conflict complicates the others suggesting--no, insisting--that life is precious. In one scene, HIV/AIDS patients gather for a Life Support meeting; and Broadway being Broadway, they burst into song: "There's only us. There's only this...Forget regret or life is yours to miss." Then a member of the group confesses, "Look, I find some of what you teach suspect because I am used to relying on intellect, but I try to open up to what I don't know, because reason says I should have died three years ago," which leads into the chorus, "No other road...no other way...no day but today."

Consider the lilies of the field. If God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will the Lord not much more clothe you. Then Matthew twists the dagger by saying, "Oh, you of little faith." At least that sentence is punctuated by a question mark, encouraging multiple interpretations. Maybe Jesus is not accusing those who would follow him of being unfaithful inasmuch as he is saying "Come, follow me."

Jesus, who has been a mystery since Bethlehem, is made more so by sayings like this, because his story is told by human beings, like Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, by people like you and me. The Lord works in mysterious ways, even through Broadway musicals. Now for a confession: Part of me has been reluctant to say much about my affinity for *Rent* in churches that I have served previously, because I have been too busy asking, “What will I eat?” or “What will I drink?” or “What will I wear?” For it is Presbyterians who strive for all these things; indeed, the Board of Pensions of the PC(USA) knows that I need all these things (yes, I substituted “Presbyterian” for “Gentile” and “the Board of Pensions” for “God,” but you understand). Then there is a potential theological conflict between one of the musical’s central affirmations---no day but today---and the church’s understanding of time. The God who created the heavens and earth is with us now. Christ was with this God in the beginning; and by the Spirit’s presence among us, he is with us now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen. Amen.

Do you feel that a conflict exists between “There’s only us. There’s only this. Forget regret or life is yours to miss” and “With believers in every time and place, we rejoice that nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord?” The operative word here is “feel.” Each and every one of us knows that we are living with a death sentence. In truth, all of us are dying, but even more important than the question, “How will we die?” is the question, “How will we live?” Carpe diem. Seize the day. It is what Jesus teaches in Matthew’s Gospel. By living with believers in every time and place, we rejoice in knowing that we are not alone, and even when the physical reality of death comes, there is a spiritual truth that sustains us and those we may be reluctant to leave behind: Nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

At that Twins’ game on Tuesday, I sat behind a traditional family: mom, dad and two sons. They may have had a dog or a cat (by the way, Michael Curry’s first dog out of seminary was named “Bishop”), but they did not bring a pet to the game. The ebb and flow of a baseball game, like watching paint dry or grass grow, is conducive to conversation, and I came to know something about this family:

The dad is a big Twins' fan, and on Tuesday, his family took him to a game to celebrate his seventh anniversary of being cancer-free. I suspect that sometime during this struggle, each and every person in that family feared that he was going to die, and I suspect that that fear still lingers in the back of their minds (and, of course, death will come eventually), but on this night, there was nothing but joy, a pure celebration of the life that has been given to them. Consider the lilies of the field, and remember the Lord will provide. O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are God's judgments and how inscrutable God's ways! For from God and through God and to God are all things. To God be glory forever. Amen.