

The First Presbyterian Church  
Charlotte, NC  
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Sunday, June 10, 2012

## **IT'S A HELL OF A WAY TO LIVE!**

Luke 10:25-37

**“Will you die?”**

He asks himself, “Will you die?”

Well, of course. But not as fast as he wants. He lies on his bed. He keeps his eyes closed. He tries to forget. Fails. He can't forget. His thoughts slip beneath his eyelids the same way his wife slips into the room to look at him dying. Slowly, too slowly and much too often.

His name is Artemio Cruz. And he has lived a lot of his life with his eyes closed. Don't look. Don't see. Avoid. He wonders why he can't just go on and die. Get it over with. No more annoying thoughts. Wouldn't that be better? Maybe. Maybe not. He will know soon enough.

In the meantime, in the time in between, he ponders life and death, politics in Mexico and elsewhere, but, most of all, death. His own death, of course, and the growing, overwhelming death of Mexico to corruption.

Artemio Cruz is the main character in last month's recently deceased Carlos Fuentes' novel *The Death of Artemio Cruz*. That is not quite accurate. Death is really the main character. As he lies dying, he says to himself, “Will you die? It won't be the first time. You will have lived so much dead life, so many moments of mere gesticulation... When you and your wife both realized one single word would be enough and you kept silent...” One single word. One word.

So much dead life. So many moments of mere gesticulation. Surely, it is a hell of a way to live. A living death. Shut away within one's self. Not willing or able to utter that word, to make that gentle motion or simple gesture of affection, settling instead for “mere gesticulation,” or a smile that never reaches the eyes, more a twitch than an expression.

**Will you die? Well, it won't be the first time.**

What do you think? Do you think something like this is driving the man who asks Jesus about eternal life?

I do. I think Carlos Fuentes has Artemio Cruz and the man who would test Jesus pegged right between the eyes. And he may have us pegged as well.

We know the story well enough. It is easy enough to sum up: the question “What do I have to do to get eternal life?” is answered with another, “How do you read the Torah?” A statement (Here's what it means to me – love God with your all and your neighbor as yourself) is agreed to (You got it) and followed with a challenge (Do that and you'll live.)

## **Eternal/Temporal life is the issue.**

The question of Christ is asked in terms of “quantity” of life - *eternal life, everlasting life*. Like that “lucky old son” we want to roll around heaven all day – and for a billion eternities after. But Jesus answers in terms of “significance or quality” of life. What Jesus has said is, in effect, “Get a life!” Get a life that matters, that has meaning – what theologian Paul Tillich called “the eternal now!” It means, says our Lord Christ, that we are to take care of the essentials and let eternity take care of itself. Read the text. Live the text. Be the text. Embody the text. Don’t treat your religious traditions like so much screensaver on your computer. Get into those traditions and live them. Get a life by living. Will you die? Sure, but once is more than enough!

Here’s life, says Jesus: love God/love neighbor. And that is just the problem, isn’t it? The neighbor! Oh, God, the neighbor!

## **I could be a saint if it were not for my neighbor!**

Couldn’t you? Most of us have trouble with the neighbors at our own breakfast tables. No wonder we don’t take on the neighbors hanging on, hanging out, and hanging around all over the place. And even though we know it is a futile effort to “dodge” the issue, we still try it. We ask anyway, “Just who is my neighbor?”

Artemio Cruz does not have a neighbor. He has excluded everybody including himself from anyone else. And the lawyer? Well, he’s got plum jam all over his thumb – “what a good boy am I!” Before we can be a neighbor, we need a neighbor! I need to be loved before I can love. I need to be shown how to love without keeping score. I need to be loved freely and completely before I can completely love. And so the old, familiar story of the Good Samaritan: “Which of these three ...?”

I do not think we have ever been able to handle this story in its strength. And so it becomes one of the most abused and domesticated stories in all of scripture. “Take what you have and sell it and give the proceeds to the poor” is the other one!

We take the biggest issue in our lives and turn it into small potatoes. How so? Well, we think the Good Samaritan’s action is probably pretty typical of a few really good and decent persons – I mean, after all, we claim to have actually seen people like this! Oh, not a whole host, but enough to have been impressed.

We think the Good Samaritan is kind of an exceedingly religious Boy Scout doing his good deed for the day. “Go, thou, and do likewise” is watered down into something like writing a check for Habitat, United Way; or giving a pint of blood during a church-sponsored blood drive; or increasing your pledge during stewardship season, maybe delivering Meals-On-Wheels, doing volunteer work for Jr. League or Kiwanis Club; nice and helpful things to do – all of them. But these are things we can afford. We are giving to others what is not *crucial* to ourselves- these few dollars, that surplus pint of blood, that extra bit of time” (McGill, *Suffering*, p. 99). We give out of our disposable income and time!

That is not the way Jesus tells the story. We tell the story as if it is all well within the range of possibility for each of us. Jesus, however over and over again stresses the excessive compassion of the Samaritan. Oil and wine, careful attentiveness, taking infinite care of the man on the side of road, establishing an open account at the inn to care for his future needs - all of his actions are excessive, lavish and indiscriminate. More than can be expected, conceived of, or copied!

Now, who in the entire world has ever been that kind of neighbor to you? Who is capable of awakening in us such love because he loves us in such a lavish fashion, excessive fashion? Ah, see it yet? Which of these three...?"

**The Good Samaritan is, of course, and can only be, Jesus Christ.**

That is John Calvin's take on the parable. And I think he is correct. The parable of the Samaritan is the story of God's love through Jesus for those of us who fall among thieves or who slip, slide, and stumble along any of life's paths. As John Calvin put it in his study of the parables of Jesus: the secret of the parables is "just as, so." *Just as* the Good Samaritan did so and *so too* God does so and so." Just as the Samaritan comes to the side of the wounded man so God comes to our side and lavishly cares for us and excessively provides for us. And in so doing, God begins to radically – as in basically – expand our neighborhood.

Beloved in the Lord, get a life! Let Christ expand his neighborhood through you and this church. If we cannot love one another in this church and others throughout the earth of whatever political, ideological, or theological persuasion, then we cannot love God. Love of God/love of neighbor – forever tied together. And all the rest of scripture and all the rest of theological and ethical discussion is mere gesticulation or commentary on Christ's ethic of love.

Tell me again when the filth of the butcher  
Is washed in the blood of the lamb  
Tell me again when the rest of the culture  
Has passed through the eye of the cam(el)\*  
Tell me again when I'm clean and I'm sober  
Tell me again when I've seen through the horror  
Tell me again tell me over and over  
Tell me that you'll love me then  
Amen Amen  
Amen Amen

- "Amen" by Leonard Cohen

Will you die? Of course, but once is enough. And in the meantime, we can't hear too often that we are loved by Christ. Otherwise, it is a hell of a way to live and we'll have hell to pay!

Amen.

\*No one appears to agree about this word. It could be "cam" or, as most copies of lyrics have it, "camp." I just happen to like "camel" because of its scriptural image in "Eye of the Needle."