

The Park Road Pulpit
Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church
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Riding the Lamé Horse
Acts 8.26-40; 1 John 4.16-21
Russ Dean, May 10, 2009



When I first heard of it, it honestly sounded like the beginning of a bad joke. But no one laughed, and I realized that Connie Culp was not the punch line of some tasteless humor, but the recipient of what must surely be one of modern medicine's most incredible gifts. Not only was the Cleveland, Ohio woman the first recipient in this country of a full face transplant, but she got a fresh start, a new life to go along with it.

In 2004 a deranged husband shot Culp in the face with a shotgun, and the injury left a physically attractive woman in the prime of her life, fighting for each breath. When she finally left the hospital, she did so with only one eye and one cheekbone, with no nose, and with a tracheotomy in her throat for breathing. After five years that must have been a living hell, enduring 30 surgeries of various bone and skin grafts, Connie Culp went to the operating room yet again on December 10th for a 22-hour procedure that would give her a new identity. A team of doctors led by Maria Siemionow replaced 80 percent of Culp's face with that from a donor, which included bone, muscles, nerves, skin, and blood vessels. Though she has more surgery still ahead, Culp appeared publicly on Tuesday, singing the praise of her doctors for the gifts of smell and taste, for a voice and a smile. And she said, humbly, "I think it's more important that you focus on the donor family that made it so I could have this person's face."

A new face is the gift of a science-fiction, that is no longer fiction.

A new start... is always the gift of God.

The Church has never waived in this belief. *For with God... all things are possible...* (Matthew 19.26). Taking its cue from Jesus, who said to Nicodemus in the darkness of his ignorance, *You must be born again* (John 3.7), the Church has held up that hope. It is a hope, the Church has insisted, that escapes no one, not the child christened as an infant in a parent's loving arms, not the reprobate clinging to a death-bed confession. A scene in the powerful movie, "Dead Man Walking" comes to my mind. In it, the unrepentant monster played by Sean Penn, only shortly before his execution for a brutal double murder, finally makes a confession. Sister Helen Prejean is the real-life Catholic Nun who had served as prophet and priest, even as she fought the state-sponsored execution of a number of men, who came to form this one, composite of a criminal. In response to this reluctant honesty, Prejean's character, played by Susan Sarandon, offers words of absolution, "You are a child of God." A pathetic, broken man stutters in reply, "Ain't no one ever called me no child of God before."

We could talk about the theology of death-bed conversions, and why they are utter foolishness to many, religious anathema to others, but I will continue to take the position of the Church, however embarrassing it may be to try to explain, that no matter what we may have done, no matter the length of a life we have used to reject that which is good, to turn against that which is God... whenever we decide to seek a new life, whether in this world or in the world to come, the welcome of God's acceptance and love and forgiveness will be waiting for us.

Whenever. Forever.¹

¹ Part of my scriptural support for this position comes from that image of heaven found in John's Revelation. In it, after the "great, white throne judgment," in which all people are judged, those whose names are found in the "book of life" are allowed to enter the holy city; those whose names are not found therein are cast into the lake of fire, along with hell (hell is also cast into the lake of fire). And AFTER this judgment, the city of God (which is the new Jerusalem, on earth, which John calls "heaven" – this is no ethereal realm in the clouds) is pictured as a city surrounded by gates (hence the image of heaven as "the pearly gates"). But why gates? In a city made up only of those who are "in"? And all the outcasts are already and finally and forever (to listen to the hellfire and brimstone preacher) "out." Why gates? Revelations 22.14-15: *Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates. Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and fornicators*

Frederick Bueckner says of this new life:

To repent is to come to your senses. It is not so much something you do as something that happens. True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying, "I'm sorry," than to the future and saying, "Wow!"²

It is those eyes that perhaps we most need. Eyes that can see the possibility of a new future. Always. A new future for the repentant killer – even if he is on his way to the death chamber. A new future for the drug addict. And for a culture addicted to its addictions. A new future for the cities of this nation mired in the senseless gun violence which is taking the lives of hundreds of tomorrow's bright minds. A new future when the words recession and depression threaten to drown us in their hopelessness. A new future for the marriage, destined for divorce. A new future for a world which still believes, incredibly, that the best way to solve our disagreements is with arms of war. A new future for a Church that cannot finally decide that torturing people is wrong. (A report out by the Pew Research Center has found that the group most likely to believe that inflicting unbearable pain on another human being is acceptable is those identifying themselves as Evangelical Christians.³) A new future... even for Evangelical Christians.

God gives us eyes to see a future which many cannot even imagine.

Today's text from the book of Acts is the story of one man's journey to newness. Most often when the word is used in the Hebrew text, *saris*, refers to a "court official," or "officer," but, technically, a *saris* was a eunuch. In the ancient world, for reasons I don't want to try to

and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood. Taken literally, I can only understand this image to mean that as long as this heaven exists, there will always be a gate to allow entry. Taken metaphorically, interpreted in light of the life of Jesus Christ, and the other scriptures that speak of God's unconditional love, I can only understand it to mean the very same thing! God's offer of welcome and inclusion is forever. Period.

² Frederick Bueckner, *Wishful Thinking*, "Repentance," p.96.

³ Reported in an Op Ed opinion by syndicated columnist, Leonard Pitts, Wednesday, May 6, 2009, Charlotte Observer, "Torture: How un-Christian of you."

imagine, much less explain from here, some men were castrated in their service to the king. These emasculated males were often placed in charge of the king's harem, or worked in service of the queen, as was the case for the Ethiopian who is the subject of today's text. Due to prohibitions and legalism found in the Jewish law codes, recorded in Deuteronomy and Leviticus, even though they "were known also to serve in Israelite royal courts"⁴ a eunuch was viewed with religious contempt. In his commentary, Robert Wall explains:

The Ethiopian eunuch is a double outcast within Israel, twice rejected by those in control of religious sentiment because of where he lives and because he has been castrated: his sexuality has excluded him from the assembly of God and his distance from the holy city makes for a difficult pilgrimage. Similar concerns continue to be impediments today for those from society's margins who seek after God.⁵

God forgive the Church for being an impediment to anyone seeking God.

Philip, traveling to Samaria as one of the earliest Christian missionaries, despite the prohibitions of his former religious convictions, out of compassion for this man, and passion for the good news, he offers it (the good news) to the Ethiopian. But as I read this story, something new hit me. It always does. You may recognize that when Amy and I conclude a baptism, we always do so with a word of offer and challenge, a paraphrase of the Ethiopian's words. We cup the water in our hands and pour it out as we say, "*Look, here is water. What it to prevent you from being baptized?*"

The new life the Ethiopian experienced, however, did not come because of a carefully crafted pastoral offer on Philip's behalf, nor was there any hard-sell evangelism taking place. As is clear from the overall context of the narrative in Acts, the writer believes that the Spirit of God is moving in the Ethiopian as they pass the water, and it is the eunuch, himself, who says, *Here is water... what is to prevent ME from being baptized?* No conversion is possible, no change can

⁴ Mercer Dictionary of the Bible, "Eunuch," p.271.

⁵ Robert Walls, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, "Acts," p.145.

occur, religious or otherwise, until a conscious decision is made by the one being renewed. (How many times have we dealt with one ensnared by alcohol, only to have to say to a frustrated or disillusioned family, “Until she has hit bottom... until he is ready to recover... no recovery will be possible”?)

The Church can, and should, offer new life to the world. In fact, if we are going to be true to the good news of unconditional love and eternal forgiveness that scripture boldly claims, we cannot be the church without that offer being front and center in all that we do. But the hard cold reality, most of the time, folks, is that if you need a new life – you are going to have to claim it for yourself.

This truth is one that seems to be missing from the minds of so many Americans. Mired in debt, for example, and so house-poor that the health and happiness of the whole family is at stake, the thought of selling the mansion and living in a smaller one (but still a mansion by ordinary standards!) never seems to occur. You do have that option! But the pressures of prestige, and the fears, mostly unfounded, that accompany our affluent, south-Charlotte lives, will not let most of us change. The water is there – but as the old adage has it, “You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink.”

What change do you need to make? What newness of life do you really long for? Is it in your marriage? Is it with a job you hate, that is unfulfilling and uninspiring, but that you refuse to give up because of the convenience, or the paycheck? Is it in your spiritual life? (So many folks say to us that they just “don’t know the Bible,” and they want to. Really? How hard would it really be to solve that one?) Is it your work with a colleague that dogs you and takes the joy from

your day? Is it your family life, or the lack thereof? Some of you have already figured out that if there are multiple of these operating in your life, they are probably connected.

Sometimes it is the job of the church to discern for you a change that you need to make. For a friend or a teacher or a minister to say, carefully, “You don’t seem happy. Have you thought of making a change?” But most of the time it is the Church’s job just to stand with one another, supporting, comforting: giving me the encouragement I need when I decide to make the change I have so long known was holding me back.

It is the church’s job to love. For love casts out all fear, and sets us free (see also Galatians 5.1).

What would you do if you were not afraid? Where would you go? (Would you go to seminary... the mission field... or would you move to the retirement center?) What would you say? (I love you... I forgive you... I’ll take the job... I quit) What would you give up? What would you take on? What newness that you need in your life do you simply need to claim, today.

As the angel said: *Fear not* (Luke 2.10).

Perhaps no one in the world, not even the owner, not even the rider, expected a thoroughbred named “Mine that Bird” to take the roses at the 135th running of the Kentucky Derby. At 50-to-1 odds, the horse is the kind of bet everyone would like to win, but almost no one has the courage to place – except the blind, happy-go-lucky fool – and God who, as Martin Luther once said, “... can carve the rotten wood and ride the lame horse.”⁶

⁶ Quoted by William Sloane Coffin in *Credo*, p.20.

As we just reminded the family of little Benjamin Mouzon, I remind you: wherever you go, whatever twists and turns you experience in life, wherever... whatever... God will be with you.⁷

So, look... the water's warm. Have no fear! What are you waiting for!?

May it be so!

⁷ In the parent/child dedication service we conducted in today's worship, we recited the words, as we always do: "Benjamin, by this act of dedication, we welcome you to a journey that will take your whole life. This is the beginning of God's experiment with your life. What life will make of you, we know not. Where life will take you, surprise you, we cannot say. This we do know and this we say: God is with you. Benjamin Alwyn Mouzon, you are a child of God."