

**October 28, 2007**

**Luke 18:9-14**

**Dr. W. Glen Bell**

### **“A Dangerous Place”**

We stand today in a dangerous place. And danger has a way of revealing who we are.

Growing up, I lived a wonderfully sheltered life in small-town North Carolina. The closest I ever felt to danger was on a warm, summer night in front of the L & M Grill.

I was only ten or eleven years old when my father sent me to the convenience store a block or two away. Most of the route that evening was safe and quite ordinary, except for the poorly-lit sidewalk right in front of the L & M Grill.

You see, the grill was nothing other than a neighborhood bar, with smoked-glass windows shrouding any view inside. To me, growing up in a home of teetotaling parents, it represented “The Great Unknown.” My unfettered boyhood imagination pictured all sorts of ill-defined misbehavior going on right behind those windows.

That evening, I hurried on past, made the purchase at the store and was on my way home when it happened. In exactly the wrong place, just in front of the L & M Grill, I dropped all the change. Quarters and dimes and pennies bounced and scattered, disappearing into the darkness. I was petrified. I briefly – very, very briefly – considered searching for the coins but, in that moment, I was deathly afraid that some very large man would open the front door and bless me out for loitering there.

Afraid and unwilling to stop and search, I hurried home. After all, I thought, what difference could a little change make?

Unfortunately, however, my father had an answer to that question. As soon as I reached home, he again shared with me the story of his losing a quarter as a young boy on his way home from the store. It was the beginning of the Great Depression and a quarter represented a lot of money. The result? His mother came back with him and they got down on their hands and knees until they found that coin in the dirt road.

So, embarrassed and a bit afraid, I trudged back to the L & M Grill. It was just as dark and just as scary on that poorly-lit sidewalk but I screwed up my courage and began looking under the parked automobile right in front of the bar. Right then (you guessed it), right then, A Very Large Man walked out the front door and asked me what I was doing under his car. In a quivering voice, I told him what had happened. To my everlasting amazement, he got down on his hands and knees beside me and helped me to search for the change. Together, we gathered up all the coins we could find and I quickly hurried home.

The danger seemed real and I was surprised by the generous grace of a stranger.

Today, you and I stand in a dangerous place. And real danger, risky and painful, has a way of revealing who we are.

Four hundred and ninety years ago, Martin Luther found himself in jeopardy - not one fueled by some ten-year old's imagination, but life-threatening risk. Today, Reformation Sunday, we remember his act of courage, when he posted ninety-five theses on the church door in Wittenberg, Germany, challenging the misguided practices of sixteenth-century Christian faith. As a result, Luther soon found himself condemned as a heretic. His books were burned, and the emperor ordered his arrest. Without Luther's perseverance in the face of great jeopardy, the reformation of the Christian church may have been stillborn, over before it began.

The danger was real, and Luther lived under threat of the edict for the rest of his life.

Sometimes, danger challenges our bedrock assumptions about ourselves.

Many of us have been touched by the heartfelt stories of the recent PBS documentary “The War” by Ken Burns. We have watched reminiscing veterans of World War II sharing testimony of their rough and painful transformation from innocent young boys into hardened combat soldiers. We have heard again the stories of Normandy and the Ardennes Forest, of Guadalcanal and Okinawa.

That global conflict also transformed a young German Lutheran pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Arrested and imprisoned for working for the overthrow of Adolf Hitler, Bonhoeffer expressed his deepest thoughts in his diary and in letters to friends and family. In the weeks leading up to his execution, Bonhoeffer wrote these lines:

“Who am I?

They . . . tell me I . . . bear the days of misfortune  
equably, smilingly, proudly . . .

Am I then really all that . . . ?

Or am I only what I know of myself,  
restless and longing and sick . . .

struggling for breath . . .

yearning for colours . . .

thirsting for words of kindness . . .

wearily and empty at praying . . . ?”

The danger was real, and Bonhoeffer gave his life for his convictions.

Sometimes, danger has a way of asking painful, shattering questions.

The queries of Dietrich Bonhoeffer are little different than some posed just a few weeks ago by Hanna Ingber Winn. In 2003 she lived in Burma, experiencing first-hand the harsh oppression of the military dictatorship there. Last month, with joy and growing excitement, she watched pro-democracy demonstrators fill the streets of Rangoon, with thousands chanting this Buddhist mantra

“Let everyone be free from harm.

Let everyone be free from anger.

Let everyone be free from hardship.”

As she witnessed the uprising, she wondered how anyone – anyone – could disagree with those sentiments. She wrote these words:

“[Previously] people didn’t dare discuss the political crisis except behind closed doors. Friends would whisper in my ear that they wanted to fight back, but the junta had all the guns. . . . A friend in Rangoon . . . e-mailed me pictures of protesters running from the soldiers’ bullets and batons on Sule Pagoda Road, the road I lived on. Thousands marched past my old apartment.

I’ve been wondering: If I were there, would I watch from my balcony, or would I participate? The junta have been targeting journalists and detaining people with cameras. Would I have the courage, like so many Burmese, to smuggle out images and stories?”

Ordinarily, when you and I think of danger, I expect some of us look back to an episode from the past. Perhaps we think of one of our own family members. For me, it could be my father, who served in Africa in World War II – or one of my four uncles who served in France and Germany, in North Africa, on a PT boat and in Panama. Or it could be my father-in-law, who a few years later was a young physician very near the front lines in Korea.

Others of us may think of loved ones now in harm's way, much like Jim and Debby Riley's son, Chris, just deployed again to Iraq, where he will be patrolling during this tour outside of the relative safety of the Green Zone. Or like the vulnerable orphans and children of Eldoret, Kenya, where everyday life presents regular danger from hour to hour.

But few of us think about our lives today. Few of us recognize that gathering for worship here and now is a danger.

That's right: Today, Second Presbyterian Church is a dangerous place. Jesus tells the story of two people who went up to worship, two people who went up to the place of worship, at the right time of morning to hear God's word and to celebrate their faith together.

Does that sound familiar? Does that sound like you and me? Does that sound like this place, today?

The two were a Pharisee and a tax collector. The Pharisee was a good person – a tither, a pray-er. You and I know lots of people here like that – church school teachers, sanctuary choir members, liturgists, pastors, people who show up for worship every week. Some of them are sitting by us on the pews.

They are the kind of people who turn in their stewardship commitment cards on time, the kind of people who volunteer for the Habitat for Humanity build, the kind of people who give blood, who sort and size for the bazaar or Christmas benevolence, who pray and work for peace and justice in Mexico and Kenya and Congo and inner-city Indianapolis.

Truth be told, many of us like to think of ourselves that way. We're helpful, we think. We're honest. We're faithful. And goodness, we are not only helpful and honest and faithful, we are part of Second Presbyterian Church, which happens to be - by far - the largest, wealthiest, most powerful Presbyterian congregation in the state of Indiana.

So as good as it is to be here, this is a dangerous place. Because with all the good – the care, the encouragement, the education, the nurture, the hospitality that this church offers to dozens and hundreds of persons each week – also comes the temptation: to trust in ourselves, in our own righteousness, and to be glad that we are not like other people.

The danger is real, and you and I stand in a risky place.

Sometimes danger has a way of asking painful questions. Who are we? Are we those who are proud of ourselves for all the wrong reasons, proud of our influence, proud of our wealth, proud of our size, proud of our beautiful buildings?

Sometimes danger challenges our easy assumptions. Are you and I content only with membership? Or does the Lord invite us to discipleship? Are we content to offer just enough, perhaps a bit more than last year, rooted and grounded in the ordinary? Or does God want to make far more of us than we imagine or measure, until we are extraordinary servants, filled with overflowing joy and peace?

Sometimes danger reveals who we are.

But perhaps that is not the danger for you here this morning. Perhaps the place of jeopardy for you is all the way at the other end of the spectrum. Perhaps you come today not self-satisfied, full of yourself and of your status. Perhaps you come empty and broken, just like the tax collector, uncertain even if God can change you and forgive you and put you back together again. Perhaps, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, you are restless and longing and sick, struggling for breath and weary and empty at praying.

Perhaps you are here hoping, hoping against hope. Hoping somehow that you can feel something again, hoping somehow that you can be transformed from the inside out, hoping somehow that there is more to life than the limits that press us down and down, always down.

If so, today the danger is the temptation of giving in and believing that the story is over, that nothing can change, that “hope” and “trust” and “second chances” are only empty words.

As a young college graduate, I learned a great deal about hope and trust and second chances at Freedom House, a soup kitchen and emergency shelter in inner-city Richmond, Virginia. Freedom House fed over one hundred homeless men and women every day, five or six days each week; they served people who lived on the street and who were beaten down by life.

One evening, while standing just outside the front entrance of Freedom House, one of the homeless men discovered his extra clothes were missing. He was certain they had been stolen, so he picked up a brick and moved toward the man next to him, demanding the return of his clothes.

The accused man looked up, and then instantly darted for safety, hurrying through the front doors and into the relative sanctuary of the building inside. Faced with an angry man swinging a brick, two staff members quickly blocked the doorway. Somehow, by God’s grace, they managed to subdue the angry guest and take the brick away from him without injury to anyone.

The danger was real. And one of the staff reflected later that he was surprised – surprised that somehow, by God’s grace – he was able to do the right thing.

For us, today, the danger is real. Somehow, by God’s grace, will we do the right thing?

We all have stories to share, of family and friends, of risk and jeopardy. The greatest danger is if we do not face the questions and if we do not consider the queries.

Do we wrongly exalt ourselves?

Do we regard others with contempt?

Do we trust only our own empty righteousness?

Or are we willing to trust God to heal our brokenness?

Who are we? Who am I?

As Wendell Berry claims, “this is [the] fearful question, and it ought to be fearfully answered.” In the end, these dangerous questions are the only questions that matter. And in the end, in Christ’s name, may the questions and the responses of our lives reveal who we are.