

BLACKSBURG PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Sunday, March 8, 2009

Rev. William L. Love

A COMEDY OF GOD

Genesis 17:1-7,15-16

Romans 4:13-25

Mark 8:31-38

Howard Baker, who first gained national attention as minority counsel during the Watergate hearings (he is the one who asked the question, "What did the President know, and when did he know it?) and is a former Senator from Tennessee and former White House Chief of Staff, is from a small town in Tennessee, not very far from Nashville. He is a member of the Presbyterian church there.

The church is a small church. Their pastors have ordinarily come to serve that church right out of seminary, stay for a few years and then move, and are followed by another recent seminary graduate.

They come out of seminary full of ideas that are untested in the real world, full of all the things they have learned. Invariably, they tell the Session all that is new in the church and all those things about which the church has changed its thinking.

Baker tells the story of one new pastor who was telling the Session all the things that the church had changed its mind about. The Session, who had pretty much heard it all before, listened patiently. One of the things the new pastor mentioned was sex. One of the wise, old Elders finally spoke and said, *If the church has changed its mind about sex, it's a dirty trick on an old man.*

A dirty trick on an old man, which is not a wholly inaccurate way of describing Abraham's situation. Abraham was 99 years old when God appeared to him and told him that he and Sarah, who was 90 years old herself, would have a child.

Frederick Buechner said it must have seemed to Abraham that *if a schlemiel is a person who goes through life spilling soup on people and a schlemozzle is the one it keeps getting spilled on, then [he] was a schlemozzle.* [Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures*, 3] God seemed always to be spilling some cosmic bowl of soup on Abraham, though that was not nearly all of it. Abraham spills enough soup on himself.

God told Abraham that he would be the father of nations and to go to the land of Canaan. But a famine came, so Abraham and Sarah went to Egypt. Since Sarah was beautiful, Abraham figured that the Egyptians might kill him if they knew she was his wife, so Abraham told her to say she was his sister. God bailed them out of that one.

Back in Canaan, in order to end disputes between those who kept Abraham's herds and those who kept Lot's herds, Abraham gave Lot the first choice between the rich bottom land of the valley and the scrub hill country. And, surprisingly enough, Abraham got the scrub land.

Then Abraham is promised a son, an heir, the one through whom all the families of the earth shall be blessed and, it turns out, his wife cannot have children.

Then after Abraham may have long forgotten the promise or figured that its coming true was beyond hope, the Lord appears to Abraham and tells him that he will become a father and that Sarah, who at 90 herself has lost the bloom of her youth, would be the mother. Abraham does what seems like a reasonable thing. He falls on his face laughing.

It has been one thing after another, but God has topped himself this time. So Abraham laughs. And the child is named Isaac, which means *laughter*.

Then, after putting them through all that, God tells Abraham to slay his son as a sacrifice. Though God spares Isaac, Abraham and Isaac never seem particularly close after that.

Abraham the schlemozzle becomes a father at 100. Sarah, the schlemozzle's wife who invariably gets some of the soup spilled on her, becomes a mother in her 90's.

It must have seemed to them a kind of comedy: a dirty trick on an old man and no small trick on the old woman either.

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Jesus began to teach his disciples that he must suffer many things, and be rejected by the religious leaders,

and be killed.

Up until now, much of what Jesus had said had been in parables. Now he spoke plainly. His words were devoid of any apparent literary nuance. And he did not tell them not to tell anyone, as he had often done before.

Jesus said that he must suffer many things and be killed.

So shocked was Peter that he took Jesus aside and gave him a good talking to.

Peter argued with Jesus. It seemed to Peter that to be Messiah could not possibly mean to suffer and die, to be victor could not mean to lose, to express concern for the life of a friend could not possibly be evil.

Peter, who on the Mount of Transfiguration wanted to build three booths (one for Jesus, one for Moses, one for Elijah) rather than leave the glory of that experience to go back down the mountain and face again its apparently mixed blessings which include suffering and death -- Peter, who now wants all the benefits of Easter without having to go through Good Friday, who wants the resurrection without the crucifixion, who wants to take the easy way out, to find a shortcut -- Peter takes Jesus aside and gives him a good talking to.

Jesus said to Peter, *Get behind me, Satan!*

Satan, Jesus called him, of all things. To want his friend not to suffer and die gets him called Satan. To want not to accept that it is he for whom Jesus will die -- that it is us for whom Jesus dies.

Satan, of all things. *Not on God's side*, of all things.

Nothing seemed to make sense any more. Salvation as a kind of comedy. Not slapstick which overpowers you and demands that you laugh. Rather a paradoxical kind of comedy, a dark comedy. A paradox where the obviously true is false and where its opposite is true. Where you laugh at the incongruity of it all. Where you laugh for lack of a more appropriate response. Where you laugh because crying makes as much sense but laughing seems to hurt a little less.

Jesus must suffer many things and be rejected and be killed. And the cross is the hard, cold reality of it. And it is for us that Christ dies.

Jesus then begins to teach the multitude along with the disciples: *If any would come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.* Not only can we not deny the cross to Jesus; we cannot deny it to ourselves.

For those who would save their life will lose it; and those who would lose their life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.

Jesus' talking plainly is of little hope when what he says seems like a riddle.

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We spend much of our time and energy making our way in this world, making a success of our lives.

Through our work and wise handling of our resources, we seek to find security against the vagaries of life, so that we will have sufficient means not to be a burden to others and to be able to enjoy some of the finer things of life. We work hard and expect our labors to be rewarded. We seek to accomplish things, and so to make our place in the sun. We seek to find -- within ourselves and through our efforts, our achievements, our accumulation of means -- the good life, the meaningful life.

And we seek to protect what we have found in life to be happiness so that it cannot be capriciously taken from us.

That kind of life seems to be *based on the mathematical truism that the more you get, the more you have.* [Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, 5] And that finally we can have enough.

And when we find, or even have a foreboding suspicion, that what we believed would be enough is not, we may seek to numb that dull ache through work or alcohol or drugs or food. But no *Blue Plate Special* can fill a spiritual hunger.

But in the dark comedy of life that reduced Abraham to laughter (though tears would have been equally appropriate), the joke is on us. While mathematically it is true that the more you get the more you have, God is not a divine accountant for whom life is arithmetic.

So Christ says, *Those who would save their life will lose it. Those who would lose their life for my sake and the gospel's will find it.*

Christ seems to be operating on the truth *that the more you give away in love, the more you are.* [Buechner, *WT*, 5]

To save one's life is to try to find within oneself the meaning of life and to try to save it up, to protect it.

If you have, for example, a musical talent and do not use it (do not practice, do not give it away somehow), you lose it.

Life is like that. The life you save up -- hoard for yourself -- is not worth much to anyone else -- or to you. Judson Mitcham is a poet from Georgia. He wrote one poem about a bus ride that he and his brother took.

They were the only riders on the bus. A woman got on the bus. She was wild looking, disheveled. She had nothing with her except a pack of cigarettes. She could have sat anywhere, but she curled up next to his brother. It scared his brother. The poem is titled *Before Prayer*.

*She curled up next to me on the Trailways,
clutching her cigarettes and change.
The light framed her face, while the bus
idled under a streetlight in Ringgold,
till it groaned on into the night,
headed south down the two lane.*

*I think of her often, this woman
who appeared in the aisle like a nightmare
somewhere in Tennessee, bits of weed
in wild hair matted on one side.
She lurched through the vacant bus
toward the one seat where, by accident,
she could touch someone.*

*When the light left her face, it came,
this ache I have felt all my life.
Whatever is within us, it is not enough.*

[*Macon Magazine*, Summer 1987, 26]

Whatever is within us, it is not enough. *Those who would save their life will lose it. Those who would lose their life for my sake and the gospel's will find it.*

To lose yourself is to find that you are finally and more fully yourself than before. To lose yourself is to open yourself to the filling of that within you that is not enough.

It is, in a sense, Frederick Buechner says, like being in love. *When you love somebody, it is no longer yourself who is the center of your own universe. It is the one you love who is. You forget yourself. ... You give of yourself so that by all the rules of [arithmetic] there should be less of yourself than there was to start with. Only by a curious paradox there is more. You feel that at last you really are yourself. ... You give up your self-seeking self for somebody you love and thereby become yourself at last. ... You do not love God so that, tit for tat, [God] will then save you. To love God is to be saved. ... You do not love God and live for [God] so you will go to Heaven. Whichever side of the grave you happen to be talking about, to love God and live for [God] is Heaven.* [Buechner, *WT*, 84]

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It is a kind of comedy -- life is -- which became a black comedy in the darkness of Good Friday. To be Messiah, Jesus suffered, and was rejected, and was killed; to be victor (for us to be victorious) he had to lose. By his stripes, we are healed.

It is a comedy, and the joke is on us much of the time -- and on the world we have made, which seems to miss the point much of the time. We are schlemiels, spilling soup. And we are the schlemozzles that we spill it on.

For us to find life, that in us which is not enough must reach beyond us to find fulfillment in the only place it can be truly found: in God, whose creation we are. And as important as finding that fulfillment is, it is important that we not let other substitutes try to fill God's place for us.

To find life for Christ's sake, we must give life away -- for Christ's sake.

We cannot deny the cross, but in God's comedy, we can, like Abraham, fall on our faces laughing.