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# The Parish Paper

OF  
ST. JOHN'S CHURCH  
SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

Vol.36 No.27

The Second Sunday after Trinity

06/05/05

## ABSTRACT AND CONCRETE (I)

Not all the Epistles and Gospels in the traditional lections of the Prayer Book are as precisely complementary as those for the first Sunday after Trinity. That Sunday offers the tremendous story of Dives and Lazarus, in which we have a concrete explanation from the mouth of our Lord himself of the second of the great commandments: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. It sets this in juxtaposition with the unequivocal restatement by St. John of the two great commandments together: This commandment have we from him, that he who loveth God love his brother also.

The story of the rich man (dives in Latin) and the beggar is therefore one form of answer to the question "what is love?", given in terms strictly pertinent to one's own self: "what does it mean for me to love?" There has always been and there is now a great deal of nonsense about love. Most of this nonsense consists of various ways of making love abstract by turning it into some sort of category of relationship. But love is never abstract. It is always specific and concrete, and Jesus' parable puts it just that way.

I suppose the only two subjects perpetually interesting to human beings and perpetually worth their being interested in are love and freedom, as we know them in other persons and as we desire them for ourselves. Not just from curiosity, for that is mere gossip, but from genuine interest and imaginative fascination. Persons and their actions are the proper material of our conversation. Samuel Johnson has it exactly: "We are geometers only by chance. We are perpetually moralists."

And therefore we dare not be abstract with love and freedom. They are qualities of persons and their actions. There are three abstractions which are quite familiar to us, and of which I think we must beware. They are easy to say, but they are in essence meaningless and therefore they are both misleading and treacherous.

1) First is the Golden Rule—"do unto others as you would that they should do unto you." A famous philosophical refinement of this is Kant's "categorical imperative", the point of which is that you should act only in such a way that your actions would be a safe precedent for universal behavior. This is the Golden Rule at its most abstract.

Taken as people usually mean it the Golden Rule is a rule of brass. Who would really dare to make his sense of himself the rule for others!

And who really knows what is truly good for him, to measure what is good for everybody else in those terms? The Golden Rule turns into a calculus of self-interest: "I'll do what you like to you if you'll do what I like to me." Or even worse: "I'll treat you right so that you'll treat me right." Or the worst of all, which is outright cynicism: "I'll treat you right if you treat me right."

2) The second of these abstractions is the by word of the so-called new morality: "What the world needs more of is love, sweet love", or something a little more sophisticated and sounding religiously respectable: "Love God, and do what you please." But who knows what loving God or loving anybody or anything means apart from a measure, a definition? St. Augustine, from whom the remark about loving God and doing what you please is pirated, went on to say that loving God and your neighbor means the practice of prudence, temperance, courage, and justice. You may or may not like St. Augustine's measure for love. You may accept or reject his definition. The point is that a measure and a definition must be given. Otherwise love is no more than abstract oceanic sentiment, and the counsel to act in every situation so that love is made "maximal" has no coherent meaning.

3) The third abstraction is the fashionable formula for open-mindedness, which is a tacit refusal to take religion seriously at all: "We're all going to the same place eventually, and it does not matter much how we get there." After all, God is just the other end of my belief in Him, and one person's faith is as good as another's, as long as you're sincere. So you take your way, and I'll take my way.

However, God is not just what I believe Him to be. God is real in Himself. He is what He is, and no amount of faith will make Him otherwise. The way you take toward God may be in fact be so false to Him and to His quality of love, and may also damage you so much and take so much out of you, that you will be nothing when you arrive, and therefore you will not be there.

All three of these abstractions treat love as a relationship of some kind or other. But love is not a relationship. Love is a quality of being, and of my personal being. Love is an action. And Jesus' parable of an anonymous rich man ("every man") and a very specific beggar with a personal name refutes these three easy pieces of moralizing about love. Furthermore, it refutes them radically.

WHR

—reprinted from August, 1983;

to be continued

**The Rev'd. William H. Ralston, Jr.**

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