

The Rev. Dean Lindsey

October 12, 2008

A Parable of Judgment 1

Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Proverbs 9:1-6; Matthew 21:1-14

In the late 1920's, with a freshly minted degree in business and commerce my grandfather became a young officer of the Interstate Bank and Trust Corporation. It was not a big bank or an important bank though its loan operations spanned across several states. And it was not a good time to be a banker. In fact, after President Roosevelt declared a bank holiday immediately after his inauguration in 1933, the Interstate Bank was never able to re-open. My grandfather spent much time over the next 65 years of his life making the depositors and their descendents whole and seeking to do the same for the bond owners and stock holders of the corporation in liquidation. It was in that capacity that he traveled to West Texas during the depth of the Depression to meet with a hotel owner who was in default on loans held by the bank. This businessman had started out with a single hotel halfway between Fort Worth and Abilene, added more properties in various other out-of-the-way towns, but seemed to have over-extended himself by building a multi-story hotel in downtown Dallas.

My grandfather, along with other bankers, was able to work out a deal with the hotel owner to restructure his debt. The business survived the Depression and began to grow and expand in dramatic ways, not just in this country but throughout the world. The businessman was known to his friends as Connie Hilton. For those of you in a younger

generation, he was the great-grandfather of Paris Hilton. For those of you in an older generation, she is a super-rich party girl and vapid cultural icon.

My brother-in-law recently related to me this history I had not known before and then added a punch line, “So you see, your grandfather is responsible for Paris Hilton.”

I’m telling you the story today to demonstrate that no one ever knows where a loan bailout plan will lead.

If I gave you a chuckle, all the better, because there has been much seriousness of late in discussions about the predicament of the financial industry. That does not mean there are not deep problems. Obviously there are. However, I think we all realize that those who traffic in doomsday scenarios rarely are offering the best solutions. And of late, there has been a lot of talk in the news about experiencing the end of civilization as we know it, or at least something approaching that.

According to an old saying, an axiom that drives the news business is, “If it bleeds it leads.” We hear from the media the most terrifying state of affairs, see the most unsettling pictures, learn of the worst possible outcomes that could happen due to everything from a tropical storm off the coast of Africa to a product recall in Western China. That’s the way they keep people tuned in or, back in the day, buying their newspaper, and keeping the advertisers happy.

But the tension that is projected in the various news outlets has been ratcheted up a few notches these past several years. On cable news, you not only get one bad story, you get two or three or more as several tickers scroll across the bottom of the screen. No wonder we are all stressed out.

In fact I thought about starting my sermon today by leading an exercise in deep breathing. Breathe in. Breathe out. We've all been taking a lot of shallow breaths lately. It's time to bring some fresh air into our lungs and some fresh insights into our thinking.

Indeed, over the years of my pastoral work, talking with couples, working with families, or helping a Session to tackle a vexing issue, I have found that in many crisis situations there is usually someone who is raising the level of tension. They speak in absolutes. They use a vocabulary of threat and fear. They usually get a lot of attention, but they are not in the business of solving problems. They are creating more of them.

And what I am describing may not be entirely external, either. There may be a part of you, a deep and inward part of you that causes your blood pressure to rise when you think about some particular issue. You don't want to have the jitters, but there is some part of you that sends up an alarm whenever the topic is money, or intimacy, or power, or responsibility — the list may be short or long.

So what do we do, to keep our own balance, even when a part of us is screaming out? Even when there are those around us who are yelling that the sky is sure to fall!

I'll tell you a few things I've done this last week. One was I went to a nursing home. I asked a 93-year-old member of the church what he thought of the financial news. And he does follow the news quite closely. He didn't say a word. He just went "Poof." That's what he was thinking, and I believe that's a helpful perspective. After all, someone who is 93 now came of age in the middle of the Depression. A young man just starting out in life but there were no jobs around. He knows what a real financial breakdown looks like up close, and he also knows we are not there now.

Another thing I did was talk to some folk who are a lot worse off than I am or ever have been. I didn't intend to talk to them. They just showed up, and I guess you could say I just listened.

One was a colleague in ministry, the Reverend Samuel Akhtar, pastor of our Presbytery's South Asian Fellowship. He keeps an office for his work in the basement of a home which is being provided for him and his family by the Presbyterian Church in Glenview. In the recent floods, a wall of water quickly inundated this basement and destroyed all of his books, his papers and notes, his computer, his desk and other furniture. None of the loss was covered by insurance. Our congregation, I am pleased to report, was able to provide a new computer for his work, thanks to your ongoing generosity.

Then there was another visitor to my office who said, "I have no money, and I can't figure out where my next meal will be coming from." Again, because of your gifts, I could respond quickly to this cry for help. I just have to thank God that we are here, because we need each other.

A few days after that a 43-year-old man in Westmont who is suffering from cancer asked for help filling a prescription. He is not a member of this church, but I was able to speak at some length to his pastor "If you could pitch in," he said, "that would be a real blessing." And we could pitch in; that was a blessing, again thanks to resources you have provided. I thank God that we are here, because the world needs us.

A columnist named Karen Blumenthal recently penned similar words. She wrote last week of the evaporating wealth we have all observed and sustained. "I absolutely cannot bear to tally up all my losses," she said. Then she added another thought. "This is

my reality check: For more than a decade I have gone to my local elementary school to tutor. There I spend time reading with children who own no books, whose families can't afford school supplies and who have never been to a dentist. For the price of 45 minutes a week, I return to my desk feeling as wealthy as any one person needs to be.”

Now, you may wonder what kind of periodicals I've been reading. This wasn't some kind of liberal, feel-good journal. I read a few of those, but this article came from none other than *The Wall Street Journal*.

I thank God that many of you are ministering to your neighbors in a variety of ways. You may be tutoring in a school, getting ready to walk in the CROP walk, or spending time with a loved one who is infirm. Keep doing those things. That is my simple prescription for the world financial panic. Count your blessings. It's a lot healthier than counting your losses. Be kind to those around you. That will build love and good will, a dividend that can never be reduced.

I haven't left much time this morning to talk about our Scripture lesson, this rather difficult Parable of the Wedding Banquet. It's the kind of passage that we could spend many hours dissecting, but I just want to focus in on one line, the response of the ones who refuse the invitation of the king. It is a gracious invitation that they turn down, not once, but twice. To be invited by a king and not want to go. It's almost inconceivable. The table has been set; the party is ready. “Please come,” the servant of the king begs them. Then, there follows this line: “They made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business.”

They are too wrapped up in their own affairs even to dine at the house of their king. Too wrapped up in their own business affairs, that is. This group is not poor people

on the edge, subsistence farmers, the most lowly of the kingdom. These are the urban elites who buy and sell, who produce and exchange, for a profit. They cannot let go of these economic activities, even for a moment. It's a sad picture that Jesus paints of them. No wonder the king is enraged.

But, it is a happy picture too, because next the doors are thrown open, and everyone is invited in to enjoy the hospitality of the king, to eat, and drink and to celebrate together. The whole world has been summoned to a party.

And that party is still going on. In the most unexpected places and the most improbable ways. It's not found in the details of a brokerage statement. You won't hear about it on the nightly news. The Finance Ministers of the G-7 are not aware of this party.

But it is happening whenever the gospel is practiced, wherever the good news is proclaimed. And, if more of us would go to the party, it really would be the end of civilization as we know it. And that is not a threat. It is an invitation.