

Gary L. Bagley
Hilton Presbyterian Church
Newport News, Virginia
October 18, 2009

The Light of the Present Moment

Eighteen years ago, I stood with a group of thirty Episcopal and Lutheran clergy in Old Jerusalem. The site we visited that morning had its roots in the Old Testament books of Kings and Isaiah, as well as the Gospel of John (John 5:1-16). The story from the fifth chapter of John is perhaps my favorite of the Jesus stories. The stop that morning was among the most personal for me in this two-week study tour. It was by far the least scenic, but because of the New Testament story behind it, it was among the most powerful stops.

The setting was the Pool of Bethesda near the Sheep Gate, which is now in the Muslim Quarter of Jerusalem. At this site during biblical times, was a series of pools whose reputation was that of having healing powers. The blind, lame, and paralyzed gathered at this pool. Legend had it that on occasions an angel would stir the waters. The first person to enter the pool after it had been “stirred by an angel” would be healed.

On a certain day, Jesus passed by the pool and saw a man who had been ill for thirty-eight years. While this is another “healing on the Sabbath” story, the exchange between Jesus and the paralyzed man is by far the most insightful point of the story. Jesus simply began his conversation with, “Do you want to be made well?” There was no, “What’s up?” or “How are things going?” It was a simple reality check: “Do you want to be made well?”

Jesus’ question stimulated the man’s oft-rehearsed excuse:

Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.

His whining and excuses had no effect on Jesus. “If you want your circumstances to change, do something about it. Stand up, take your mat and walk...and at once he was made well.”

Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnam Zen Buddhist poet, author, and peace activist has said: “The present moment is the only one over which we have dominion.”

Today's second in a series of three stewardship sermons is on the importance of the present—"The Light of the Present Moment." Last week I told you that I was getting my inspiration for these three sermons from a father/son therapist team (Ted and Brad Klontz) and a Certified Financial Planner (Rick Kahler). The three of them collaborated on a unique little book, *The Financial Wisdom of Ebenezer Scrooge*, subtitled "Transforming Your Relationship with Money."¹

The book is not about Christmas nearly as much as it is about poverty, the abuse of children due to no child labor laws when it was written, the manner in which finances can control a person's life, if he or she allows it, in addition to the spiritual overtone of being given a second chance (salvation) to live a good life. Understanding a bit about Charles Dickens life adds appreciation to the old classic, *A Christmas Carol*. Dickens' own father was imprisoned for three months due to debt. The family moved into the prison, but twelve-year-old Charles was forced to take lodging nearby, pawn his collection of books, leave school, and accept employment in a shoe polish factory.

Authors Klontz and Kahler cite a 2004 statistic: 72% of Americans indicate that money is their number-one stressor. Their financial consulting firm, "Your Mental Wealth," addresses money disorders. The fascinating part of their book is how money scripts are developed as a child, and how these money scripts drive a person's adult life.

Last Sunday I cited the money scripts the authors said belonged to Scrooge in his wealth:

- *You can't trust anyone with your money.*
- *People only want you for your money.*
- *You must work hard for money.*
- *You can never have enough money.*
- *Don't spend money on yourself or others.*
- *Money will give you meaning in life.*
- *The more money you have, the happier you will be.*
- *You can never be happy if you are poor.*

¹ Ted Klontz, Rick Kahler, and Brad Klontz, *The Financial Wisdom of Ebenezer Scrooge* (Deerfield Beach, Florida, Health Communications, Inc.: 2006).

- *Giving to the poor encourages laziness.*
- *If you had more money, things would be better.*

The authors were just as quick to cite Bob Cratchit's money scripts in his poverty:

- *There will never be enough money.*
- *Money is to be spent, not saved.*
- *You'll be paid what you are worth.*
- *You can never be happy if you are rich.*
- *If you are good, the universe will supply your needs.*
- *You don't deserve money.*

All of the money scripts are half-truths.

My sermon ended last week with the point that one's past has a powerful ability to inform and instruct—Scrooge's first visit, "The Ghost of Christmas Past." Each of us has a "great future in our past" if we are willing to learn from it.

Today, the focus is on the present—how paying attention to the present is necessary for having a healthy relationship with your money. Too many people live with a mantra of "When I make more money, I will begin to save, pay off my debts, give to the church, give to my school, tithe, or help others." The present is the only place where we have control. The time to teach people how to use the resource of money is when they are young. Most kids have a passion for learning and excelling. Once we have revisited our past relationship with money, it is time to gather new information about what it means to see the world clearly, to live authentically, and to experience abundance.

While we can assume that Scrooge had enough money to live in abundance, he chose a life of poverty. His money script, "Don't spend money on yourself or others" was so powerful that Scrooge was uncomfortable just being in the presence of such abundance. Scrooge's visit to the past (last week) has cleared the way for him to take in new information. For the first time in his life he is beginning to experience reality. The "Ghost of Christmas Present" takes him to several locations to see others who are living in abundance and authenticity, despite harsh circumstances and a lack of money. Scrooge learns

that regardless of money or situation, people can be happy. He learns that having money or not having money does not create happiness or misery.²

On his trip to the present, Scrooge witnesses a number of scenes: he sees a Christmas celebration in a lonely lighthouse, sailors humming Christmas carols to themselves though trapped onboard their ship in miserable weather, a poor family living in a mud hut joyfully singing carols, the Crachits enjoying a festive Christmas dinner, and his nephew, Fred, hosting a joyous Christmas party—a party to which he was invited but responded with the trademark, “Bah! Humbug!”

People can be rich and happy; people can be poor and happy; people can be poor and miserable; people can be rich and miserable. We must live in the present, because the present—today, this moment—is the only time we have control over. We live in the present only when we are able to see the world as it really is, only when we live authentically, and when we experience abundance.

Today’s passage from Job, chapter 38, is his entrance into the present. Job has been living in the past with all his many, real infirmities, complaining to God about its unfairness, demanding that God give him an explanation. Then, out of the eye of a violent storm God responds. “Why do you confuse the issue? Why do you talk without knowing what you are talking about? Pull yourself together, Job! Up on your feet! Stand tall!” (Job 38:2-3 *The Message*) The scene is a little like Jesus’ encounter with the paralyzed man who has been waiting around for years, complaining about his misfortunes, and living for someone else to solve his problems.” For both Job and the man by the pool of Bethesda it is “time to fish or cut up bait.”

I think I’ve told you the story of the man who had a neighbor who fished and always came home with a nice catch. When he asked if he could go fishing sometime, the neighbor invited him to fish with him the next morning. The neighbor told him not to worry about equipment or bait. He all the gear they needed. Early the next morning the two pulled out and headed for the river. The man kept scanning the boat for rods and reels, live or artificial bait.

² Ibid. 83.

When they reached the desired spot, the neighbor shut the engine off. With two nets near by, the neighbor reached into a sack, pulled out a stick of dynamite, lit it, and flipped it out into the water. It disappeared, but soon afterwards exploded, spraying them with water. Wide-eyed, the man began to see fish floating to the surface. He was handed a net and the two of them began scooping up fish—lots of them. When the last fish was in the boat, the man began to protest. “Isn’t this against the law?” “You’re going to get us both arrested for doing something that is illegal.”

The neighbor simply reached back in to his sack, pulled out another stick of dynamite, lit it, and handed it to his friend. “Are you going talk or fish?”

Living in the present means learning to be realistic. It is giving some reflection regularly to the question: “What kind of world would we have if everyone was just like I me?” You’ve heard the old church jingle:

*What kind of church would my church be
If all of its members were just like me?*

How would it impact the level of outreach to the community and persons needing a community of faith? How would it affect the hospitality factor? The missions factor? The teaching/educational factor? The budget? Spiritual growth? The justice, diversity, and healing/peaceful factors of Hilton?

Many people spend their lives complaining about the past or dreaming about the future, rather than facing reality and living in the light of the present moment. Someone once asked a rabbi what was the most important event in Jewish history—creation, Moses and the burning bush, the crossing of the Red Sea? The rabbi responded that the Talmud says that the most important event in Jewish history is today.³ “...So for tomorrow and its needs I do not pray, But keep me, guide me, hold me, Lord, Just for today,” wrote Samuel Wilberforce, an English bishop and son of William Wilberforce, a politician who devoted his life to abolishing slavery. Jesus taught us to pray, “...give us *this day* our daily bread....”

For those of you familiar with this Dickens classic, do you remember the last scene as the Ghost of Christmas Present is about to leave? He opens his cloak

³ Wendy Mogel, *The Blessing of a skinned Knee: Using Jewish Teachings to Raise Self-Reliant Children* (New York, Scribner: 2008),

and shows Scrooge a vision of two small children. One is named "Want" and the other's name is "Ignorance." The Spirit reminds Scrooge, and perhaps all of us, that of the two, "Ignorance" presents the greatest danger to his well-being. It's what we don't know that can hurt us. The challenge for Job, the paralyzed man by the pool of Bethesda, Scrooge, and perhaps all of us, is what will we do with what we are open and brave enough to learn?

Prayer

Lord...So for tomorrow and its needs we do not pray. Keep us, guide us, hold us, Lord, Just for today. AMEN.

Job 38:1-7 (34-41)

Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind: "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me.

"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements — surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?

"Can you lift up your voice to the clouds, so that a flood of waters may cover you? Can you send forth lightnings, so that they may go and say to you, 'Here we are'? Who has put wisdom in the inward parts, or given understanding to the mind? Who has the wisdom to number the clouds? Or who can tilt the waterskins of the heavens, when the dust runs into a mass and the clods cling together?

"Can you hunt the prey for the lion, or satisfy the appetite of the young lions, when they crouch in their dens, or lie in wait in their covert? Who provides for the raven its prey, when its young ones cry to God, and wander about for lack of food?"