

Brentwood Presbyterian Church
Sermon "This Very Night: The Time Is Now"
Guest Preacher Rick Ufford-Chase
August 8, 2004

Rev. Dee Cooper:

It is my honor to introduce you to Rick Ufford-Chase. I saw Rick recently at the [216th] General Assembly [of the Presbyterian Church (USA)], at which he was elected Moderator, and even after 700 people had passed through a receiving line, Rick was still excited, enthusiastic and full of vitality. It was a time of great celebration, and so exciting to see someone take charge of our church with so much zeal and enthusiasm and the church supporting his leadership wholeheartedly.

Rick is the co-founder and co-director of BorderLinks, which is a bi-national organization that looks at globalization and how that affects Mexico in its relationships with the United States and other countries. He is also one of the co-moderators of the Presbyterian Peacekeeping Committee and was a peace-seeking award winner in 1996.

It is not just with honor, but with joy and privilege and respect, that we invite Rick to share God's message with us today.

Rick Ufford-Chase:

BPC has the distinction of having asked me to come and preach before I was elected Moderator, which has made me somewhat famous in the Presbytery. I'm very pleased to be with you and speak in particular about concerns that I have been working on and lifting up for some 20 years as a mission worker for the Presbyterian Church (USA). But this involves discussing topics that are difficult.

It has always been my contention that good preaching is a conversation between a pastor and that pastor's community, so that there's room for reflection and change in a good, receptive community. If the pastor says something that's completely and totally off the wall, it's appropriate for the congregation to dialogue with the pastor, and with each other, perhaps even establishing a long-term conversation about the topic in question. In fact, one time my own congregation became so incensed by what our pastor said that it took us three separate sermons for the issues to be worked out. It was an ongoing dialogue in an encouraging, challenging, receptive community of faith. That's what good preaching is about, so it is no small irony that I find myself as Moderator preaching in a different church almost every single week, where I know very few people personally.

But it is my commitment as I travel, to preach our common Lexionary, those scriptures that many of our churches work from each week, in an attempt to fit into the broader conversation of the church and to be a piece of that conversation wherever I go. This is the Scripture then that I want to share from the gospel of Luke that are last week's and this week's Lexionary texts. I want to say also that these are hard words. It is both good

news and bad news, the good news being that this is one of the most powerful texts in our gospel tradition, and the bad news that it is text particularly convicting to us.

Will you then bow with me in prayer as we ask God to be present for the reading of these words?

Oh, God, we pray for courage, the courage not to sugarcoat your words, to believe and to trust that you intended these words to mean just what they say. We ask for strength, for your comfort, for our support for one another as a community, as we listen carefully to these words this morning. In Christ's name, amen.

Reading from Luke 12, beginning with the verse 13, it's entitled, "The Parable of the Rich Fool":

"Someone in the crowd said to him, 'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.' But he said to him, 'Friend, who sent me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?'" And he said to them, 'Take care. Be on your guard against all kinds of greed, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.' And then he told them this parable.

The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'I will do this. I will pull down my barns and build bigger barns, and there I will store all my grains and my goods, and I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years. Relax, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'You fool. This very night your life is being demanded of you, and the things you prepared, whose will they be?' And so it is for those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.

Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear, for life is more than food and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens. They neither sow nor reap. They have neither storehouse nor barn and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the bird and can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? Consider the lilies, how they grow. They neither toil nor spin. Yet I tell you even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you, you of little faith?

Do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink and do not keep worrying, for it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your father knows that you need them. Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, and unfailing treasure in heaven where no thief comes near and no moth destroys for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

God's good, if somewhat difficult, words for us this morning.

My wife and I have the good fortune of being close friends with a couple and their children who live in the town of Aguaprieta, Sonora Mexico. Aguaprieta is located just across the border from southeast Arizona. It was at one time a small ranching community but is now an industrial city where many American corporations have set up manufacturing facilities.

Leti and Martin are like hundreds of thousands of other Mexicans from the southern and central part of the country. Over the last 30 years, they have left home to look for work in the north. Leti and Martin were married in their hometown of Pueblo where they met as teenagers. After their first child was born, they discovered that they couldn't make ends meet, couldn't pay the bills. So they made a decision that Leti would stay with Martin's parents and Martin went north to Tijuana to look for work.

He found a job in one of those manufacturing facilities and worked there about nine months before finally he couldn't stand it anymore, and he went home to his family. They tried a number of different jobs, a number of different ways to make ends meet, but they eventually decided that the only way to provide a future for their family was to move as migrants north to the US - Mexico border, look for a home in Aguaprieta, and go to work in one of those factories. Eventually both sets of parents followed them, because everyone was leaving those central, rural areas and heading north to look for work in the global economy.

When they arrived there, Martin found a job at a company called Avants, which is an American-owned company. He eventually became a line supervisor, working some 18 hours a day. Even now he starts his day at 6:00 a.m. on the line, and most days he does not finish until sometime between 10:30 and 11:00 p.m. He works six days a week, averaging 90 hours a week, and his take-home pay at the end of the week is \$100.

Leti had to leave the home and get work as well. They now have four children, three beautiful little girls and a little boy who is a toddler now. She leaves her children with her mother and mother-in-law during the day and goes to work in another factory, where she averages 75 hours a week almost every week.

They try to hold Sunday sacred as a time with family to be together, no matter what. They try not to work on Sunday. Leti is also a supervisor, and she takes home almost as much as Martin does. Between them, their household income is about \$200 per week, \$800 a month.

Martin and Leti are like so many people in our world today. They are what I would call in the bluntest language “the servants of empires.” And the hard news for us is that we are part of that 20% of the world’s population that are beneficiaries of the global economy, or again in that blunt language “the beneficiaries of empires.”

No matter how hard Leti and Martin work, they know they are never likely to get ahead. The most they can hope for is to get their children through high school and help them find a job outside of that system. But the likelihood that their family has any chance to move beyond what they are able to do, is not high.

We have a different problem. There is a word I want to teach you this morning. I learned it in Guatemala when I was living there with my family last year doing mission work. The word is “*fufurofo*.”

Learn that word. It is important. The Guatemalans use it as a way to deal with the discomfort they feel when they see material abundance that is over-the-top. Here are a few examples of how the word is used. Looking at a huge, luxury home, one would say, “That woman’s house is super *fufurofo*.” Or, on seeing a large, gas-guzzling car with all the bells and whistles, someone might comment, “Wow, that car over there! That is really *fufurofo*.” It is a gentle way of poking fun at the vast disparity that exists between their lives and the lives of those people who can afford to be *fufurofo*.

I have found it a useful word for myself and my family and our friends, and the people I work with on delegations on the border and in Guatemala. It affords us a gentle way to take on and own who we are in the world today. As we travel in those places where the disparity is so great, we can look at ourselves and say, “Wow! What are we going to do about being so *fufurofo*?”

So the central challenge of our text of this morning, and the moral problem that Jesus is confronting in the text we read, is what do we do when we are *fufurofo*. It is a challenge to all of us and further to our church, the *Church of the Fufurofo*, in the most powerful nation on earth. What in the world will we do?

I want to read a passage that helped me get a handle on this, because it is one thing to think about who I am individually as *fufurofo* and another in the global economy to take on what it means to be a nation of *fufurofos*. This is from a reading that I discovered about six months ago from Tom Peterson. It is in a book that I highly recommend to you called, *Beyond Guilt: A Christian Response to Suffering*. A Lutheran theologian named George Johnson is quoted in the book, in this excerpt called, “Dreaming Upside Down”:

“I dreamed the other night that all the maps in the world have been turned upside down. Library atlases, roadmaps of Cincinnati, wall-sized maps in war rooms of great nations even antique maps inscribed ‘Here Be Dragons’ were all flipped over and what had been north was now south, and what had been east was now west.

“And in my dreams a cloud of anxieties closed around me. Now that we are at the bottom, would our resources and labor be exploited by the new top? Would African, Asian and Latin American nations structure world trade to their advantage? Would my neighbors and I have \$2.00 a day seasonal jobs on peach and strawberry plantations? Would the women and children work from dawn to dusk to scratch survival from the earth of California and Virginia? Would the fruit we picked be shipped from New Orleans north to Thai and Ethiopian children who hurriedly eat it with their cereal so they won’t miss the school bus?

“And would our children then go, not to school, but to fetch water from two miles away and gather wood for cooking and heating? Would we work in sweatshops to manufacture radios for the Chinese? Would our oil be shipped in tankers to Southeast Asia to run cars and air conditioners and microwave ovens, while most of our towns were without electricity? Would religious leaders from the top of the world call us stubborn pagans upon whom God’s judgment had fallen causing our misery? Would they proclaim from their pulpit that if we simply turned to God our needs would be met?

“In my dreams, I saw a child crying in Calcutta. Her parents wouldn’t buy her any more video games until her birthday. I saw her mother drive to the supermarket and load her cart with junk food, vegetables, cheese, meat and women’s magazines. And I saw a mother in Houston, baking bread in an earthen oven. She had been crying, because there were no more beans for her family. And one of her children, a blond boy about six years old listlessly watched her and slowly turned his empty gaze toward me.

“And with that I awoke up with a gasp. I saw I was in my own bed in my own house. Everything was okay. It was just a bad dream. And I drifted back to sleep thinking that’s it’s all right, I’m still on top.”

Jesus has hard and challenging words for us as the *Church of the Fufurofo* in a world gone mad. We have a special responsibility to stretch beyond anything we’ve ever imagined and to take Jesus’ word seriously. So what shall we do, given this seemingly insurmountable challenge? What shall we do?

I think it has to be answered in two steps. The first question is, “What will we do as individuals?” The second question is, “What will we do as a community?”

Let’s talk first about individuals. Let me say to you that guilt is not a motivating emotion. It might motivate you for a short while to act in a particular manner, but for the

most part, if guilt is our underlining motivation, we will not stay the course. Eventually there's nothing left underneath, and we give up. It's just too hard.

Please do not hear my words as a guilt trip, because that is not what it is about. This is an invitation to develop relationships. I am not strong enough to take seriously the words in this passage from Luke and tear down those barns and put my security elsewhere. I can't do it, if it's just an emotional or even an intellectual exercise.

It has to be something more than that. The things that confront us are just too strong. From the moment I was born, the message has been, "Be responsible, get a good education, get a good job, so that you can care for your family." I know you have heard those words. You've probably said them. We're told over and over what kind of car to drive. "You need a car like that. It's the safest car on the road. It will protect your children. That's the responsible thing to do." You have heard those words. You have probably said them. I have said them. "You need those clothes. You need them to maintain your job, which is what gives you the ability to take responsibility for your family." I've heard those words; I have even said them.

There are so many ways that we are taught over and over again in our lives to build bigger barns. And Jesus says to us, "No! That is not where your security comes from."

Okay, I want to do something, God. I really do, but where in the world do I begin? I am, after all, a child of privilege. I was born where I was through no fault of my own. What can you expect me to do?

In my own life I have discovered that it is far easier to take these words seriously when I am in relationship with people like Leti and Martin. It is my relationship with them, my friendship with them, that holds me accountable as someone who is undeniably *fufurofo*.

It is not about guilt. It is about being so close to them and loving their children so much that when I have to make decisions, when my wife Kitty and I are trying to decide what we will do to sustain our own family, we think about our friends like Leti and Martin. Or Becky and Julio in Guatemala. We have the good fortune to be in relationships that hold us accountable. I think to myself, "Okay, if we're going to buy this house, will we be comfortable asking Leti and Martin to stay with us? If I'm going to drive this car, could I drive this car into Leti and Martin's neighborhood and not be embarrassed? If I wear these clothes, are these clothes going to strengthen my relationship with Leti and Martin, or will they create distance between us?"

Do you see the difference? It is all about relationships. So the first challenge to us as *fufurofo* in a world of want is actually to step outside our comfort zone, to go to the places where people have next to nothing and to become friends with those folks. Then those relationships begin to change our lives.

If that is our challenge, what is the challenge to our church? I hope that our church is about creating the space where we gain support from one another to go out into the world

and to be in those relationships. That is our mission enterprise. Mission today for you and me is about moving into the world and building friendships. It can never just be about writing a check, although I have written many and I am sure most of you have too. It is about putting my life in that relationship, on the line, in solidarity, so that I understand what it is really about, and I become an advocate for someone.

If church is about preaching week after week, “Let’s go into the world. Let’s build those relationships,” then you take a risk, and the church will support you. Your church will be with you. If we do that week after week, it begins to happen. I’ve seen it happen. It is the most exciting thing you could possibly imagine.

Church, my friends, can never be about sitting inside these doors and creating safety in the midst of madness. It can never be about that. It always has to be about going out that door Sunday morning immediately into the world and saying, “Where is God calling me to be? How will I change my life because of this? Who can I be in the world?”

When we do, we find that there is really a new and more radical notion, or perhaps I should say an old and more radical notion, of security. It is Jesus’ notion of security. “Tear down the barn and give up what you have. You fool, this very night your life will be required of you.” What will you do?

Here is what security looks like to me, and I believe it is from a careful reading of the gospel. In a secure world, a day’s wage is enough to provide for the basic needs of one’s family, everywhere. Period. There can be no debate.

In a secure world, my use of the world’s resources will be appropriate and modest and measured, so that I am not destroying the environment where someone else lives, or where our children will live, or where someone else’s grandchildren will live.

In a secure world, my lifestyle in America will be balanced and sane so there can be no perception that my family’s well-being has come at the expense of the well-being of Leti and Martin’s family.

In a secure world, we will create communities by cohesion, not by coercion. We will learn the art of negotiation and consensus building and community. And we will forego the two easy solutions that come at the point of a gun.

In a secure world, there will be no profit. There will be no profit in providing military, police, prison, and guard security to protect us. Instead, we will plow those profits into the things that really do protect us – good housing, healthcare, education, community infrastructure— and we will work to make that happen for everyone all over the world. We will no longer have to live in fear of the rest of the world when we do so.

What a radical notion in a country that is currently defined by fear. Jesus has good news for us.

The question of course is: Do we dare? Do we dare to read not just this story, but so many stories throughout the gospel, in fact throughout the biblical tradition, that demand that we risk, that demand that we, the *fufurofos*, try it out?

I want to share an image with you to close this morning. Last year while we were in Guatemala, my eight-year-old son Tao decided to try a “canopy tour” in the treetops of the jungle. Outside the gates of Tecal, at the ruins, there was a little eco-tourism business, and they put us into these harnesses with a pulley on it. We walked about two kilometers out into the jungle where they had strung cables in the treetops that started about 55 feet up. You clip onto cable lines and then ride down from tree to tree until finally you reach the ground.

This seemed like a great idea to Tao from the ground, until we climbed the tree, and we were standing there, all clumped together hugging the tree on this little platform way up in the top of the jungle canopy. The howler monkeys were right there with us. We could almost reach out and touch them, and they were screaming. Tao, his eyes getting bigger and bigger, watched other people go. Finally, it’s my turn, and I clipped in to the line, let go and slid down to the next platform.

I turned around and I looked back as my wife picked Tao up, because he wasn’t high enough to get to the cable. She clipped his waist in and gave him a shove and he let out the longest, most terrified scream I have ever heard. It lasted all the way until he was in my arms. I couldn’t really tell when he was coming toward me if it was a scream of joy or a scream of fear. When I caught him and he was in my arms, I realized it was both. He was genuinely terrified, and at the very same time he was thrilled. And at every single platform all the way down, we clipped him in, he let out that same scream, and then he wanted to do it again.

Isn’t that a great image of the dilemma that we face as *fufurofo*? We are asked to do something that terrifies us, because it is something beyond what we can imagine.

When we read this gospel and we don’t try to find some way to spiritualize it, we say that Jesus did not mean what he said. Jesus said to give it away, give it to the poor, give alms to the poor and build the kingdom of God. That is where security comes from. When we try this in little moments, my friends, we discover that it is the most exhilarating, joyful, wonderful moment that we could possibly experience. That is what this church should be calling you to do.

When any one of you in this room wants to take that kind of risk, this is the place that should be saying to you, “We want to be a part of that. We want to support you. We will love you no matter what happens. You are not being irresponsible to take this risk. Responsibility is what we are going to show, when we step up as a church to support you.”

That is responsibility. And the question is, “Do we dare?” Amen.