

Some practical advice on dealing with the unknown

1 Timothy 6.11-19; Psalm 146; Lk 16.19-31

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It was a morning, so much like this morning. The sky was beautiful. Blue. You could see for miles. Not a cloud in the sky. And the sun! The sun bathed everything in gold.

We made our way to the train. At the station, everyone was waiting patiently. Many were talking with what must have been regular passengers. Some were quietly reading the paper. Others were chatting on their cell phones. Still others, just sat and watched. It was just a normal day for them. But, for us, it was an adventure.

The train ride itself took only about 20 or 25 minutes, depending on other rail traffic. There were not nearly enough seats to go around for everyone. But, everyone looked as they look on a normal, average day. But, we were excited, and it must have been obvious. Every once in a while, people would glance our way and smile. And, of course, all of the cars were bathed in that beautiful, brilliant sun light, coming through a cloudless sky.

We arrived through the dark tunnel into the train station itself which was abuzz with activity. Disembarking from the trains, the hundreds of people moved along toward the half a dozen escalators waiting to take us to the main station.

Station? This was more than a train station, more than just a ticket booth. No, no: here were shoppes of every kind, from news stands, to a complete mall with food shops, pizza places (lots of pizza!), clothing stores, record stores.

And here, too, were many more people than we had just been with, as other trains disembarked their passengers up other escalators. No one could say where these people had come from except that before they had gotten on their trains, long before, they had come to this place from what must have been almost every continent under the sun. Every nationality seemed to be in evidence both shopping and working there.

Now, finding our way out was not easy. It seemed obvious to those people who looked as though they were off to work. They knew where they were going, but we didn't. That was part of the adventure.

But finally we did find our way out, and back into that brilliant sunlight. Yet, we were not outdoors: we were in a huge, cathedral like lobby, with windows stretching to the vaulted ceiling. Incredible. We gasped.

But, then: oh, how disappointing. Look at the line-up. And what a line! Oh, well, that's part of the adventure: sometimes you have to wait for something great.

And so we waited, and again were thrown in with all sorts of people, people who were well-dressed and not so well-dressed. People from a multitude of nationalities. I don't see anyone famous, though I kept looking, thinking that I might. I just saw a lot of ordinary, little people. People probably thought the same about us.

The people we were standing in line with seemed to be from India, from what my wife told me, likely from the area near Pakistan, where my wife was born. They were chatting away when suddenly a lady came running up to them. They looked cautiously as she came up. She shouted: Here, here are some coupons. I didn't need them. You take them!" Their caution seemed to melt away like snow in that brilliant sun outdoors and they laughed together and thanked the lady profusely in their broken English.

Finally, tickets in hand, we made our way to the obligatory security check. It was tedious but not very careful. In fact, my son Jonathan had forgotten to take his pocket knife out when he went through. It rang but no one paid any attention. They were too busy. Well, it doesn't matter: it's just another, normal day. It'll be OK.

And, then, yet another line. This time for the elevators. Fortunately it didn't take too long.

But, what was really impressive is how the elevator ride itself didn't take very long. You'd get on them (I was prepared for this since I'd been there more than once before) and they would woosh you up, 100 floors, almost to the top. Woosh!

I looked at the elevator operator: black girl, nothing extraordinary about her. I thought: what a boring job, explaining instructions time after time. And I thought what a painful job: ears popping all the time, up AND down, up AND down. Woosh, pop, woosh, pop.

But, before one could really take it all in, the elevator doors opened and there you were. It wasn't immediately apparent where "there" was since you had to exit down a windowless corridor. But, after walking down the corridor, you knew exactly where "there" was: at the top of the world. There, with the beautiful blue sky above you, partially hidden by one floor still above, but what was clear to all was that down below you was all of Manhattan. Way below. So far that Rachel wouldn't even go near the windows. Of course, you couldn't fall with the windows there but it still seemed as if you could. I knew better: we were safe here. So, I sat down as close to the window as I could get so that I could look down, way down, at the streets below, over a hundred stories below.

We walked around the four sides, looking down at the sites that were highlighted on the inner walls. There was the Statue of Liberty. There was the Empire State Building. The wall explanation told us that Central Park had been built at the end of the last century as a workers'

paradise, a place where workers who had no vacation possibilities could go to experience part of God's creation, right there in the midst of the biggest city in the world.

And, there were hundreds of tourists there from every conceivable race and nationality. People who had come to see, to enjoy the sight. Though coming from a variety of backgrounds, we were together not in a church, a temple, a mosque. We weren't there to worship. We were just there to wonder at what we were seeing.

Then we went to the top, the very top. A young Latino worker sat there, bored, making sure that the escalators worked well and that no one had difficulties. He was bored because everything worked so well.

And at the top, the very top, under only the beautiful blue sky, surrounded by the same throng of visitors, one wondered at how high above everything one could be and still be secure.

There at the top of the World Trade Center, with dozens of little people on a great adventure out of our normal lives, being attended to by hundreds of other little people who were serving us, moving us around in elevators, making sure the escalators worked well. There we were standing over the heads of thousands more little people working in the offices and shops and train station under us. There we were standing over the millions of little people -- and I mean LITTLE people -- walking on the streets below. I saw no celebrities that day, no big people, no media celebrities or politicians, in the midst of the millions that we saw that day. Just lots of little people, going about their normal lives, as we went on our adventure, just a few short weeks ago, at the end of our summer holidays. An adventure, needless to say, that we will never, ever be able to repeat again, at least not as we did it that day.

Because all that normality came to an abrupt stop on September 11.

In fact, everything that we used to call normal seems to have come to an abrupt stop. For people in NYC that is obvious: instead of two great pillars of daily life and its securities, what has opened up before people living NYC, is a great abyss, a great chasm. And for everyone who is alive today, what used to be called normal now sits not under a brilliant, cloudless sky, but under a big question mark. What lies before us all as never before is a great unknown. Surely it is not overstating the case to say that people are asking themselves: what now? How do we deal with this?

Given this situation, here is some practical advice on facing the unknown.

First, because what lies before us is unknown, we should be careful about mapping out what is coming next. As Christians, we have always been taught to be careful about saying what is going to happen when, or even to be careful about saying too quickly that this is what I will do tomorrow. Why? Because, we have been taught that one simply doesn't know what will happen next, including when one's life will end. Unfortunately, one doesn't always remember that that is the case until something dramatic happens, like the events of Sept 11.

It is also the point of the Gospel story concerning the rich man and Lazarus.

- Every day the rich man ate a fine meal: it was part of the normal course of daily events. Why would that ever change? Tomorrow, he will do what he did today.
- Every day, after eating, the rich man would go for a walk. As he left his home, he would pass a sickly beggar who sat there every day and who simply survived on the scraps that he could find. Why should that change? After all, we have it on good authority that "the poor you will always have with you." No, the poor man would still be there tomorrow, begging, dogs licking his sores.

But it does change, when both of these men unexpectedly die.

- The poor man, named Lazarus in the story, is taken into heaven and is unexpectedly comforted in the most beautiful fatherly fashion by Abraham. Having been denied comfort all his life, probably even bereft of family, this poor man can now rest, and rest for all eternity, in the comfort of a father, who will not only make him feel good but will protect him from any further harm, throughout all eternity.
- The rich man, unnamed, who had all the creature comforts in this life, suddenly and unexpectedly finds himself bereft of all that he had, absent all his friends, with no one to comfort him in what appears now to be eternal anguish. Even though he pleads with Abraham, who is like the voice of God in this story, for someone to comfort him, or at least to warn those who have been left to change their ways, Abraham says no to all his requests: no one can comfort those whose eternal destiny has been decided by they themselves and no one can adequately warn anyone who has not experienced this dramatic shift about what will happen.

My guess is that if I had preached on this text prior to the events of September 11, you, too, could have left this service somewhat cold to the brutal and stark reality depicted in this story, namely, that your decisions or lack thereof in this life will make a difference in the unknown future. But, you have been given a unique chance to hear this story and to hear it in a way that you would likely never have heard it. Through Jesus' voice, you have been given a glimpse into the unknown.

And what he is telling you in this story is the second piece of practical advice: make your life count by giving.

When something dramatic like this happens and reminds you that you stand before the unknown: how do you live? You could throw up your hands in despair and say, "it doesn't matter".

Or more likely you might just sit at home in fear, or in mourning, paralyzed by the unknown. I know that there are many people who are living in NYC now who are doing just that: afraid to come out of their homes, afraid to stay IN their homes, weeping over lost ones. I know that there are many people who have lost a loved one, or who have been abused, women who have been

raped, men who have been damaged in some severe way, who are in the same condition. This is a reality.

But, for those who are not paralyzed in this way, or for those who were paralyzed and through a process of healing have come through on the other side, but still remember that their life could end at any time, what do they do? No, for those not paralyzed or for those who come out of their paralysis, there is an important lesson from the events of Sept 11 and from our Gospel: they begin to make their life count by giving.

In comparison with the events of Sept 11, our Gospel seems trite and banal in what it says about giving. On Sept. 11 we saw people giving their lives to rescue others; in the Gospel story, we are talking about a wealthy man, giving or not giving, from his wealth. But, in light of what Jesus teaches in this parable about the consequences of giving, it appears that giving, no matter how big, no matter whether it is the giving of alms to the poor and needy or the self-giving of the firemen who sought to save lives at the expense of their own, giving of what one has is what matters.

Why? Because giving reflects as if in a mirror who the God who made this world is: a God who is gracious in giving. A God who cares for the little people who sit at the gate, and for the little people who worked in the World Trade Center! Is there ever room today to speak about a God who does not use little people as stepping stones to greater things, much less as cannon fodder or human missiles, but rather who gives Himself even in His own death for them, the God made known in Jesus Christ.

But, third, you may be saying to yourself: what do I have to give? In the case of Lazarus, the rich man had riches to give. That is the case with many of us. We are among the richest people in the world, because God has gifted us and our land with prosperity. That may be in the form of money, or it may be in the form of what results from our wealth: our strong, able bodies, our technology, our entrepreneurial skills, etc.

But, God has not only gifted us with riches. God has gifted us with a variety of other gifts that we can share with people, just as God has shared them with us, so that by God's emptying his rich coffers into our poverty, we might become rich in so many ways. He simply asks that we share with others in need, people in a variety of situations, from those who are buried in the rubble and those who are digging them out, to those whose whole country will need to be rebuilt on a foundation that is very different from the one that has been until now.

- God has gifted us with a land that is large and can encompass many peoples. Surely for many of us who are immigrants, we should open our door to others to allow them the space to breathe and the opportunities that are often denied them in their own lands, sometimes just because everyone is so pressed together.
- God has gifted us with institutions of government, built on the foundation of Christian teaching for centuries. Democratic governments in which people can disagree without being killed or tortured. Our God deals with us not be threatening us if we do not believe

in him. There are religions in which that happens, just as there are governments in which that happens. Our God deals with us by asking us to love him, by drawing us to himself, but never by removing our freedom. We can share with the world around us the great gift of democratic freedoms that exist only in those countries in which Christian teaching has become the bedrock of social life.

- God has gifted us with emotional health. How many cry out in need or lash out in need because they are so wounded and angry and distorted in their thinking? Surely, one of the greatest gifts that we can share with those who lie at our gates is the constant outflow of emotional health that comes from Christians who love their neighbours because they love themselves, from Christians who do not live in fear and mourning but who, in spite of their own sadness and doubts, trust one who is unshaking and unmoveable. Consider these words from the flight attendant on a flight last week from Denver to Washington's Dulles Airport: "The flight attendant began the safety speech. One of the things she said is that we are all so busy and live our lives at such a fast pace. She asked that everyone turn to their neighbors on either side and introduce themselves, tell each other something about your families and children, show pictures, whatever. She said "for today, we consider you family. We will treat you as such and ask that you do the same with us." During the flight we learned that for the crew, this was their first flight since Tuesday's tragedies." Now, where do you think that the flight attendant got that sense of family, that sense of togetherness, the idea of having people turn to each other and greet each other, if not from attending a church and experiencing that greeting that you gave each other here? Where else do you find that being done in society that has not been touched by the Gospel?
- But, surely the greatest gift that God has given us is the gift of his own Son, Jesus Christ. Surely, it is incumbent upon us not to sit comfortably at home or in our pew while at our gates there are those who do not know the love of God expressed in Jesus his Son. Surely, the one gift that, if we hold back, God will ask us "why?" is the gift of the knowledge of God through Jesus. And, is there ever room today to speak about Jesus, and about the God made known in Jesus?

So, don't think that there is nothing that you can do to help in this new situation that confronts us, the new world order of the 21st century, the new world order of the unknown. Nor think that the only way that you can help is by giving of your wealth. That is just one way among a variety of others that those who call themselves followers of Jesus can show the love of God.

But, fourth and finally, how to give in the unknown. Everything? A little? How much is enough? When do I stop giving of my wealth? When do I stop giving of myself for the healing of others before I become emotionally crippled myself. How much do we open the doors of our land or of our democratic institutions before they cease to be life-giving, drawing on the Life-Giver? How do you plan strategically when what lies before you is the unknown?

My final point, then, regarding practical advice on dealing with the unknown, is drawn from Jesus' words to his disciples when he sent them out into the unknown, to share, to give, to heal, to teach, to cast out demons, something that none of them had ever done before. It is not a recipe

for giving, but it is a principle when giving. He said to them: "I am sending you out as sheep into the midst of ravenous wolves: be as smart as serpents, and be as innocent as doves." (Mt 10.16)

"Be smart." When you go out into the unknown, giving what you have been given, know this for certain: you will be in the midst of ravenous wolves. So be smart. Be street-smart, would be a good translation. Do not be deceived: there are people out there who simply want what you have, and will take it from you and then take your life. Don't be deceived. These are people who spend their whole life telling lies, and you need to recognise those lies for what they are, not believe them, and, if possible, expose them so that others will not believe them.

But, you also need to know who the people out there are who are your allies. They may not believe exactly the same thing as you do, but they might if they had the chance. They might not look like you, or dress like you, or even act like you. But, they stand on the side of life and a God who cares infinitely for the small people, the little people. As Francis Schaeffer once wrote: the Christian will find himself an ally of some strange and unexpected people sometimes. Being smart means recognising lies and recognising your allies.

And, "be innocent". And, when you go out into the unknown, giving what you have been given, do this: give innocently, or transparently, sincerely. The word means: let people see that there is nothing false about you. The recent hand-written document that the terrorists were given to guide them urged them all the way to stay hidden, to keep their actions minimal so as not to draw attention to themselves, to stay in the darkness. We are urged to do all of our actions in the light, so that they can be seen by all men, anywhere, all the time. Remember, character is who you are when no one else is around to see what you are doing. So let your character in public and in private be exactly the same. Be transparent in all that you do: no hidden agendas.

My friends: 4 practical ways to deal with the unknown:

(1) know that all that you can be sure of in this world is the unknown, including when your life will end;

(2) live your lives to reflect the God that you worship, a God who freely gives, not first to those who can give back, but to those who cannot, because that is what God has done with us and this is what God will ask us for: an account when our life does end;

(3) give from what you have to those who need it, whatever it is that God has given you from the abundance of God, be it from the wealth God has given you, the setting that God has placed you in, by participating fully in the political order that is the result of centuries of Christian teaching, from the emotional health that God has given you to support others in their time of need, or from your knowledge of Jesus, God's greatest gift to us all; and

(4) in giving, be smart and be transparent: don't be duped, recognise those who are your true friends as you go forth into the unknown, and be completely transparent in all of your dealings with all those you meet.

Oh yes, and know this: that in the midst of the unknown, there is only one who is unchanging. Our God is unchanging in his love and in his mercy. That is the God whom we seek to follow as he leads us into the unknown and through the unknown to the assurance of life.