

Once upon a time there were six male sibling retardates. They weren't retardates in the neurological sense, retardates by circumstances beyond their control; rather, they were self-retarded, self-under-developed: they were responsible for their retardation, their underdevelopment. They'd stopped developing before they became men--or would it perhaps be more accurate to say that since they'd stopped developing before they became men, they didn't really become men, but only old boys. Nothing had ever sufficiently impressed them to get them developing again--e.g., a death, or a resurrection.

Now, in the ordinary course of events, one of the six died and went to the place prepared for self-retardates, for old boys and old girls who had enough chance to become men and women but passed it up. The dead one, finally shocked into awareness of his and his siblings' condition, tried to get a message to his brothers so as to shock them into getting going again on their development so they wouldn't be consigned to the place prepared for self-retardates; but he couldn't get through--in fact, he was told that it was useless to try, because his brothers had so hardened themselves against shocks to their inertia that not even a resurrection would phase them.

You recognize that I have told a parable of Jesus in modern terms, specifically in terms of behavioral science, precisely in the terms of developmentalism, the study of our life-stages vis-a-vis the human potential. Now let me tell the same story keeping close to our Lord's words: *A certain rich man every day clothed himself in purple and fine linens, primping his appearance, and as carefully chose his cuisine, pampering his stomach. Living in the greatest luxury within his walls, he never noticed that every day outside his rear gate there lay a poor cripple; or even if he did glance at him occasionally, he wasn't interested enough to ascertain that the poor man's name was Eleazar (Greek, "Lazarus"). Now Lazarus, his skin full of sores, was so utterly destitute that he survived only by having pitying neighbors put him day by day at the rich man's back gate, that being the gate the garbage was daily carried through, the kitchen slave pausing long enough for the cripple to pick it over. Of course the dogs, too, knew that that was the right gate to go to to scrounge for food; and getting there before the garbage came*

*out, they would lick Lazarus' sores, thirsty as they were in that land of summer-scarce water. Furthermore, the rich man was so stingy that he half-starved his staff, so the garbage pickings weren't all that good; and between that fact and the dogs, who were quicker than the cripple, Lazarus never got himself a full belly of scraps, so each day he was carried home with a stomach still asking for more; as for a square meal--since he was born a cripple, he had about as much notion of that as a child born blind has of light.*

*Now, in the ordinary course of events, Lazarus died and was--extraordinarily!--carried away by angels and seated at Abraham's right hand, his very bosom, the place of honor in a heavenly banquet such as he used to only dream of! He had known it was to be like this at the end of the age, the messianic feast, but here it was real already at the end of his mere life! "The beatitude is already fulfilled," he said to himself; "I am the poor, and I have already inherited the kingdom of heaven!"*

*Also in the ordinary course of events, the rich man died, and was buried. From his torment in Hades he looked up and saw Abraham a long way off and Lazarus in his bosom, at his right side, the place of honor! So he cried out, "Father Abraham! Pity me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am tormented in these flames!" Abraham was unmoved. "My son," he said, "Remember that during your lifetime you got the good things and Lazarus the bad; success came your way and failure his. Now he's taking it easy and you have it tough; he's being comforted while you're in agony. And that's not all: between us and you there's a great gulf fixed; anybody wanting to get from here to you can't, nor can anybody from your side cross over to us." "Then," said the rich man, "Father, I beg you to send Lazarus to my father's house, to my five brothers, so he can warn them, telling them the whole truth about their condition, so they don't wind up in this misery I'm in!" Abraham shrugged and said, "They have the Bible--Moses and the Prophets--; let them listen to that." "Ah no, Father Abraham," replied the rich man, "the Bible will never change them, they don't pay that much attention to it; but if someone were to come to them from the dead, they'd repent!" Coolly, Abraham*

cut him off: "If they are deaf to the word of God, they'd be blind to a resurrection. If they will not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they'd not be convinced even if someone were to rise from the dead."

Sisters and brothers, a year ago less one day I stood here and preached the Bicentennial sermon celebrating the success of our American Revolution, the cutting of the power cord that bound us to the other side of the Atlantic. I spoke of the logic of that revolution, expressed in its noble and world-stirring documents, ambiguously fulfilled and betrayed, placarded and compromised, fragile but enduring still. I spoke of the global life-style revolution pressing ever more insistently upon us "on this shrinking planet whose biosphere is being polluted and whose resources diminished and whose powers are both multinationalizing and tribalizing and whose cultures are interpenetrating and self-isolating and disintegrating and reforming," rediscovering roots and manufacturing hopes. And I asked, "What now is our responsibility as American citizens 'under God' as we are being forced to lower our political and economic expectations and raise our respect for the limits which God, both through nature and through the rest of humanity, is pressing upon us?" I concluded, on the model of the great Micah text so powerful among the preachers of that revolution: "What the Lord requires of us--us biblical peoples, Jews and Christians, us Americans --is that in this Tricentennium we use our God-given powers and opportunities to do justice against age-long and nation-long wrongs, to love compassion and show it in the use of our private and public resources, and to walk in humble, eager openness with our God, 'under God.'" Well, now it's only one day before we shall have lived through the first year of our Tricentennium. And here I am again, in the same pulpit, preaching revolution again. I am preaching to people who now for more than two centuries have enjoyed history's most successful revolution, and here in Chappaqua to people who are able to live in Chappaqua because within the American civilization they have themselves become outstanding successes in the power that grants freedom of movement, possession, and service, namely money. And for our meditation this Freedom Sunday I am raising the question *What is being required of us if we are to succeed not just nationally and financially but as human beings?*

At the center of our Faith stands One who succeeded as a human being but failed in the two ways we Chappaquans have succeeded. Our nation has endured and is now the oldest representative democracy in history: his nation disappeared from history only a single generation after him. The poorest person now hearing my voice is rich beyond the hope of most of the people now alive on this earth: he died a beggar. For two centuries now plus one year we Americans have been free to develop our own culture and civilization: his country was under cultural constriction of an alien way of life, the Greek, which the rich and powerful Palestinians aped, despising the Jewish ethos. For two centuries now plus one year we Americans have been free to make our own political decisions: his nation was under the cruel, cynical, insensitive Roman heel. We should expect then, sheerly on the basis of this diametrical difference in life-situation, that Jesus will have some uncomfortable things to say to us, some light to throw on us where we are blinded by our power and wealth, some words to say to us where we are deafened by the roar of our successes.

For the rest of this sermon, the guiding question will be *What can this parable of the rich man and Lazarus yield for us as to what Jesus understands as succeeding as a human being?*

1. First and quite simple, the parable tells us that *succeeding as a human being requires steady noticing of what's happening to human beings, and moral response to what one sees.* Jesus was human because he steadily, courageously, observed the blinding and deafening--the desensitizing--effects of power and wealth on the powerful and wealthy who maintained their power and wealth by averting their glance from the baleful effects and by untruth, injustice, and betrayal. And he was an equally keen observer of the effects of this corruption on the wretched of the earth, the powerless and poor. The averted glance and the expenditure of time and money on diversions from moral response, the price one pays for such behavior is one's own dehumanization.

Right now I'm interviewing prospective participants for my Mid-Career Exploration program, and I often here something like this: "I've made it, but I have the uneasy feeling that I'm not making it as a human being." Two weeks ago, a conversation with an executive nurse went something like this:

Said she, "I like my work, but something is missing. I know it sounds sentimental, maybe even downright pious, and I hope you won't laugh at me--but I want to do something beautiful for God." Said I, "So you've been reading Mother Teresa's autobiography!" "No," she said, "but I saw her on TV six months ago and haven't been able to stop seeing her. She's physically ugly, and I'm told I'm physically beautiful. But in doing something beautiful for God (her way of expressing her motive in her daily sweep of the dying off of Calcutta streets) she is so utterly human; and I, I go about my work with great efficiency and little radiance, little beauty. I went to a counselor who is known for his humanity, and I found the same beauty, and I asked him where he got it, and he said from Jesus; he's a graduate of your program, and suggested I check in with you." Yes, there is a radiance, a beauty, in the divine discomfort of steadily noticing what's happening to people, including oneself, and making courageous moral response thereto. The moral response might be phrased in the question "How shall I use my resources for truth, justice, compassion, beauty, joy?"

2. Again: in steadily noticing what's happening to human beings, Jesus invites us--in addition to making a *moral* response--to make an *intellectual* response, to diagnose and prognose the human condition, social situations, antecedents and consequences of life-styles and particular actions. An intellectual exercise Jesus practiced is called the reversal technique. Let's notice it in the parable. In the vertical layering of society, the higher one is on the pyramid the more one "has a name" and "is a name"; the lower, the less one has a name; and the lowest class is the nameless mass. So Jesus says to himself, "I'll tell a story in which the man at the top has no name and the man at the bottom has a name. I'll call the bottom man 'Lazarus,' and the top man I'll just call 'the rich man.' And I'll reverse something else, viz. their fortunes. To do this, I'll use another stage, the afterlife, as a mirror reflex. And I'll stand the whole situation on its head, so that the first is last and the last first. I'll revolutionize the situation!" [That's literally what "revolution" means, a half turn of the wheel. And now that I've explained one word, I may as well go on to explain that Jesus was quite sophisticated in

extending metaphors into parables, sayings into stories, this-world actions into next-world consequences (the calculation of consequences being an intellectual activity). Prophet-philosopher-poet that he was, he used the available furniture of Jewish folklore and popular religion to communicate God's word to our condition, and we miss the heart of his message if we imagine that his every expression is to be taken literally.] Now notice in detail how the terms of the this-world situation are reversed in the projection into the next world. Now it's the rich man's turn to be the beggar, and Lazarus pays no attention to him. God under the figure of Abraham role-plays the rich-man's insensitivity in creating "a great gulf fixed" between himself and Lazarus--the gulf being the distance from the front gate to the back gate of the rich man's house (that architectural distance now being given a quarter turn, putting the rich man in hell and the poor man in heaven: the "fixed" impassibility of the gap is the transcendentalization of the social fact that the rich man would no more enter by the rear gate than could Lazarus enter by the front gate, or even at all!). Note again: the power aspect of the role-reversal appears at the level of desire: in the old world, Lazarus would have liked to enter and couldn't, the rich man could have gone to Lazarus (noticing him and making moral response to him) but wouldn't. Now Dives [the name given him by later interpreters, or rather just the Latin word for "rich man"] is dying to have Lazarus come to him to relieve his suffering even only a little bit, and Father Abraham won't let him--in fact even claims that he can't get across to Dives--any more than he could "get across" to him in the former life.

Now, let's not fall into simple moralism and legalism in interpreting this parable. Jesus is not naive about social conditions; he's no simple-minded preacher of a pure ethic, hooked on the ideology that the rich are bad and the poor good. Luke 16, the chapter in which our parable occurs, is a collection of Jesus' sayings and stories about money; and if you get into it you'll find a more complex, more human, economic analysis than those of Adam Smith and Karl Marx. Jesus isn't interested in laying a guilt trip on us Chappaquans; he's interested in getting

us to notice steadily, compassionately, intelligently the baleful effects from the misuse of wealth's power, and then to use all these resources--courage, patience, compassion, intelligence, and money power itself--toward a juster society with more human processes, structures, and institutions. He is quite precisely saying that here and now the great gulf between persons and between peoples is *not* "fixed," and that the initial responsibility for narrowing the gap lies with the rich. On this I could tell you many stories of what's going on right now, but I'll limit myself to the stories of two couples who were together in one of my Mid-Career Exploration groups.

John and Sally Pilshaw are for these two years volunteer missionaries at their own expense in Micronesia, where some years ago John established Mobil Oil. Why are they back, at the loss of two years' income and the risk that John will have to return to the Mobil pyramid on a lower level? Yes, they had fallen in love with the people; but the way they put it is, "They knew us as rich Americans who wanted to use them; now we want to be with them as human beings who love them and rejoice in them and in our common humanity; in religious language, it's something we can do for God."

Sheffield and Anne Clarke, who visited us three weeks ago here in Chappaqua, are radiant with a double project they've just begun in San Jose, California. Transferred by Libby-Owens-Corning to head the West Coast branch, they first bought a beautiful suburban home, then increasingly experienced divine discomfort, sold it and bought a 20-room wreck in the ghetto, and have become the nucleus of an all-things-in-common Christian community that aims at self-sufficiency financially as well as spiritually. They've started a labor-intensive, worker-owned gasket company, and they hope to provide a model both of human-scale community and of appropriate-size technology.

Now of course not all of us are going to take plunges of the size of the Pilshaws' and the Clarke's, or even of that something-beautiful-for-God nurse; but all of us can ready ourselves to speak out against injustice and prejudice and vote and act toward a more humane church, community, nation, and world.

3. In the third place, Jesus's parable lets us know that *human beings meditate on the humane tradition*. The six male sibling retardates were underdeveloped not only because they habitually averted their glance from uncomfortable realities but also because they did not fix their attention on the best of the humane tradition, the Bible (called in Jesus's day "Moses and the Prophets"). I know and have taught all the scriptures of the world's great religions, and I can assure you that no body of sacred literature comes anywhere near the sensitizing, humanizing, revolutionizing force of the Bible. The earliest Christians assumed that they were to give daily attention to Scripture; and I make the assumption that every Christian should be lifelong in individual and group Bible study, meditation, prayer, and reflection on action. Without that, Jesus sardonically says, even if somebody pulls off a resurrection you wouldn't notice it! [In fact, people didn't much notice the resurrection Jesus effected on that other Lazarus, or even Jesus' own resurrection.]

Howard Stone Anderson, who finished his interim with us last Sunday, almost never missed Breakfast for the Hungry Hearted at 8am Saturdays in the memorial room, and that conversation group often comes upon some great and moving insight and incentive from Scripture. I hope that under the leadership of Dick Ryder our church will have many Bible-study-and-action groups. They are at the heart of every vital church I know of.

In his last meeting with Breakfast for the Hungry Hearted, Dr. Anderson spoke of our town's "addiction to recreation" and "schedule obsession," both factors in arrested development, spiritual and moral and intellectual retardation. Something can be done about it if Dives wakes up and discovers he's a spiritual Lazarus with a hungry heart. Then too, we'll be less apt with Lazarus to fall into hell, as we almost did Wednesday evening, but the grace of God delivered us. Speaking in love what each believes to be the truth is the norm by which the community is constituted, the gifts of God distributed, and the mission of God furthered.

4. And finally, though first in importance, Jesus' parable, as all his teachings, *lets us see ourselves, and live our lives, "under God."* Across our country tomorrow that phrase "under God" will sound forth in every

place as Fourth of July celebrations use the Pledge of Allegiance. May there be more than the usual depth in the celebrations!

To succeed as human beings, Jesus is saying in our parable, we must be human to each other, strive to create a more human world, and define our humanity in the light of deity. The most profoundly and joyfully human, religious, Christian folk I know are pastors of storefront churches in the most profoundly inhuman world I know, New York City's ghettos. Saturday mornings I've been teaching black storefront clergy, and Saturday afternoons hispanic storefront clergy and teachers in Bible schools; and these folk are such an inspiration to me that I ought to pay them to let me work with them! They know, while living in hell, what it means to live "under God."

Optimism centers in circumstances, hope centers in self; but these men and women know that when circumstances are untoward and hope in insustainable, what remains is trust, trust centering in the living God, trust that knows how to live waitingly "under God," the God who views society from below and so knows the names of the poor--the God, too, who views the world from above, and so calls us all, rich and poor and female and male and of every race and age, forth into our common humanity.

Pray for our church's 11th Synod now in session, and see how its agenda is sensitive to the very values this sermon's parable leads us to meditate and act on. For along with Jesus' other parables, this one invites our participation in his understanding of human existence, how to succeed as a human being, "under God."

Wednesday on my commuter train I picked up this blue flier, the current publication of the Metro lines. It explains why the sky on the vast ceiling of Grand Central Terminal is reversed: "The artist copied the celestial display from a medieval astronomy book without realizing his basic mistake. Ancient astronomers depicted the skies from a vantage point above the stars, whereas modern astronomers view the stars from the earth."

To put it another, and the more natural, way, moderns have a provincial, narrow view of astronomy, whereas the pre-moderns did not! The text of the flier is a circumlocution: to avoid the embarrassment of mentioning God, the wording speaks only of a viewpoint "above the stars"--whereas to put the truth flat out and unambiguously, what you see as you look up at that great ceiling many of us Chappaquans see every workday is the sky from the eye of God: your eye, New York City, America, humanity, are all "under God." Dives and Lazarus both go through that main concourse day by day, and they are equally under God whether or not, severally, they know it.

The Church exists that we may know it, and daily and weekly remind ourselves of it in worship, and tell the world of it, and show the world we mean it by paying up to its cost. For God above us and below us wills our joy through justice and our peace--the world's peace--through courage.