

# Addresses Southern Baptist Forum

For release after 7:30 PM, Sunday, June 12, 1988

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## **"Improvising Grace" (Matthew 10:5-22)**

by Bill J. Leonard

It was Ash Wednesday, 1978, and my friend Bill Ratliff and I arrived at Saint Luke's United Church of Christ in Jeffersonville, Indiana, to conduct our first ever Ash Wednesday service. Ratliff was interim pastor at the church and he invited his friend, the church historian, to join him in that somber celebration which marks the beginning of Lent. We were both very excited about our spiritual adventure, and thought we were well prepared for the beauty and dignity of that historic observance. Then came the crisis: "Where are the ashes?" we inquired with Adamic innocence. "What ashes?" the deacon replied, driving us from paradise. "The minister always furnished the ashes."

Panic seized us. Like Reverends Laurel and Hardy we searched madly

in closets and desks but to no avail. Where would we get ashes? Then came the obvious: Why not improvise? We could build a fire, put it out and make our own ashes. A deacon rushed in with a newspaper. The *New York Times*, the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, the *National Inquirer*, I know not, but we burned it in the kitchen sink, doused it with water and created (of course), not ashes, but soot, soggy, messy soot.

No time to quibble. We searched for suitable vessels and again we improvised. Cereal bowls contained our precious treasure, and off we went to worship.

At the appointed time, our newfound Christian friends came forward to hear the ancient words of repentance and mortality: "Remember my brother/sister that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." And with that word they received the emblem of faith, a soggy, sooty thumbprint on their foreheads.

And after that, we shared the Lord's Supper, done the way most Protestant congregations improvise it, with tiny pieces of undissolvable bread—"Baptist Chicettes,"—we sometimes call them—and little plastic cups full of temperance grape juice. What a farce, that evening. Isn't it just like a couple of Southern Baptist preachers to turn Ash Wednesday into Saturday Night Live? Think about it. We took soot, Baptist chicettes and Welch-ade and claimed the presence of the living God. If that's not improvising grace, nothing is. But something happened that terrible Wednesday evening to my friend Bill Ratliff, to me, and even to a congregation of saints in Jeffersonville, Indiana. Something good, something crazy, something akin to grace. In spite of our bungling, we encountered the elusive presence of God. It was a moment of grace I shall never forget. Aren't the people of God always grasping the good grace of God's presence like that? Seizing the half-baked idea or an unexpected moment of boredom or tragedy as an occasion for grace?

And isn't that what Jesus is getting at when he commissions the twelve and through them all the rest of us? Sending them out like a dozen Don

Quixotes on a deadly serious errand with an 'almost frivolous method. He calls them to announce good news of the kingdom without a contingency plan—without a gospel first-aid kit. He sends them out from the warm womb of his presence into the brave new world of discipleship. He asks them to jettison all the "things" which might give them security, to live at the mercy of others, to make themselves vulnerable to the vicissitudes of political and ecclesiastical policy makers.

"You are on your own," he says. "Go out and grow up." Heal, raise, cleanse, cast out, but don't so much as pack a bag, don't take your charge cards or your running shoes, or even a sack lunch. Don't try to anticipate every possibility. Live by faith. And when the going gets tough, when the grand jury indicts you, be not afraid, the Spirit of your father speaks through you. There will be grace to make it—grace alone—grace to improvise on the journey.

Now I know that this promise is addressed to an obviously apostolic task force. I know it reflects a distinctly kerygmatic, almost kenotic imperative with decidedly eschatological overtones (don't you just love it when we talk seminary?). I know some of you see it as a prophetic example of an ethical lifestyle, while others christen it a first century Bold Mission Thrust. I also realize that most of us will never attempt to carry the gospel exactly like that, with that kind of vulnerability. There is a sense, however, in which this calling toward dependence on and improvisation of grace belongs to every one of us.

It belonged to Martin Luther, but he was a long time discovering it. Oh, there was no shortage of grace in the medieval church, it was there for the taking, but it was less an improvised grace than a grace for every contingency. Indeed, for better or for worse, medieval religion aimed to make the elusive grace of God a tangible element of life for priest and peasant alike.

Luther grew up desperate for grace, trying to anticipate every possibility for currying Divine favor. He became a monk, a priest, and a Doctor of Theology. Surely God would not send a Reverend Doctor to Hell. He denied the flesh, fasted, prayed and struggled with poverty, chastity, and obedience. He laid aside purse and staff, cloak and shoes as Jesus commanded but even that could not alleviate the despair and the gnawing fear that he had left some spiritual stone unturned. It was never enough.

Ultimately, Luther discovered that we don't hold grace captive, it holds us. The church, he finally concluded, was attempting to shackle "spirit to structure," to second guess God and anticipate how, when, and why he would act, and who, what and where he would save—to create a doctrine to cover every possibility.

Medieval Christians read passages like Jesus' commission to the twelve and concluded that by relinquishing cloak, purse, shoes, staff and other accessories one automatically came closer to grace. By grace you are saved, they (and we) declare but there are certain ways to insure you have it: Purchase an indulgence, or invest in a little seed faith; join a monastery or go to seminary; stake everything on the infallibility of the pope, the Bible or the historical critical method; do street preaching or peace preaching and be saved. They even reduced their theology into slogans suitable for financial security in this world and eternal security in the next. "When a coin in the coffer clings, a soul from purgatory springs." "Expect a miracle." "Something good is going to happen to you." "Make Jesus your choice and he'll give you a Rolls Royce." (I made that one up. See how easy it is?) But none of that saved you, Martin Luther says, apart from grace alone. Faith, Luther discovers, is not merely expecting a miracle. It is believing in God when there are no miracles. Faith is not just believing that something good is going to happen to you. It is believing in God when nothing good is happening to you. Whatever your religious activities, the real questions is: Does the Spirit of your Father speak through you? If so, you are then free to live out God's grace in a myriad of ways.

To say that we are free, free to live by grace alone, free to improvise, does not mean we fail to prepare, study, reflect, struggle. It means we can never prepare enough. All the education in the world, all the doctrines, all the creeds can never insure that we won't sometimes have to improvise. And sometimes life thrusts us into a situation for which we could never prepare even if we knew in advance it was going to happen.

They will come, those moments, in some dark night or early morning when you are all alone and called to respond to situations they never warned you about at Seminary or Sunday School class, evangelism conferences or Deeper Life seminars, and neither Ronald Regan or Jesse Jackson, Adrian Rogers or Carlisle Marney, Francis Schaeffer or Frederick Buechner, Sandi Patti or Tina Turner can tell you what to do. There you are in an emergency room full of imminent pain and instant chaos and there's no time to do a Greek word study, no time for psychoanalysis, no time to take a poll or check the Bible Faith and Message—only time to improvise beyond text books and proof texts, sermon

manuscripts and in-depth Bible studies. And from somewhere deep as darkness you hear the word, "Fear not," the Spirit of your Father is around here somewhere. So you speak, act, improvise and live, hoping like heaven that it really is God and there really is grace.

We are free, aren't we, to be monks or missionaries, TV preachers or conscientious objectors, free to dogmatize or improvise all in the name of grace.

Jesus improvised a lot, didn't he? And it got him into a lot of trouble. There is a blind man in his path begging for sight so Jesus makes a paste of dust and spit and by grace heals him. Good news! But he did it on the Sabbath and the religious crowd could not believe that grace could come outside the prescribed ecclesiastical regulations. Improvising grace may sometimes seem a bit irreligious. Another time the people are hungry and there isn't a fast food place for miles around so he borrows five loaves and two fishes from a little Jewish kid, says the blessing, and everybody, saints and sinners, experiences quite tangibly the grace of God. And, says he, *God* even improvises from time to time, like when the king gives a big banquet and the proper guests don't show. So he substitutes another, more available, kind of crowd: the people with tobacco stains on their fingers and whisky on their breaths, the kids in wheelchairs, and the old folks with no teeth, and the ex-cons with crosses tattooed on their backs. "Come on in," he says, "there's all this food and all this grace and I'll not let it go to waste."

And then there's Lazarus. He's dead, you know. "And if you had been here, Lord," says a grief stricken sister, "my brother would not have died." A truly divine contingency would never let this happen to any of us, especially not to your friend, our brother. But no, Jesus had not been there, so dare we say it, he improvises and the Father speaks through him and dead-as-a-doornail Lazarus comes forth from the tomb.

To improvise grace is to take a chance, to risk everything on faith. For it may not be grace at all, or the wrong kind of grace in the wrong kind of place. You gamble, with only moments to spare, that something will be right and you'll know it and it won't hurt more than it helps. It is a gamble to minister like that and sometimes you will improvise and be wrong and need more grace to live with your failures. There are times when we embrace people and ideas whose dust we should shake off our feet, and sometimes the people who repulse us the most are those we should embrace.

Does that mean the gospel is absolutely relative? No, it means life, even Christian life, is absolutely unpredictable. And the wisdom to know when to stand on unshakable convictions and when to grace for all the ambiguity you can get is what Holy Spirit is about. It is also to know moments of abject terror, for to speak as if the Father speaks through you is to take the chance that it may not be the Father speaking through you at all.

But we don't just learn to live by grace alone. Sometimes we must act when we are alone with grace. Luther did, so have a lot of the saints, who have laid their lives on the gospel line. The memory runs like a litany of grace improvised and imparted.

Anabaptists burned and drowned by Catholic and Protestant alike:  
Audacious grace in the baptism of adult believers:  
Baptist preachers rotting in Virginia jails: imperinent grace without a license from the state:

Lottie Moon evangelizing in China—starving herself with the Chinese while Georgia Baptists worried that she might be teaching the gospel to men.

Rosa Parks parking herself in the wrong place on a city bus—liberating grace for the racism of Montgomery, Alabama, and the American nation.

Mother Teresa, in Jesus' name scraping up the poorest of the poor and the deapest of the dying from the streets of Calcutta that even the hopeless cases might know the grace of a clean bed and a loving touch.

Sometimes like them we find ourselves alone with nothing but God's grace between us and oblivion. Then, perhaps, we learn to improvise the most.

Martin Luther King, Jr., once recalled a day in Philadelphia, Mississippi, at the height of the civil rights movement in the South. They marched, he said, surrounded by crowds of whites, some of whom had murdered a black man days before. Says King, "I just gave up—I wouldn't say I was afraid, I just gave up. I yielded to the real possibility of the inevitability of death. I was speaking and I said, 'The murderers are right behind us,' and somebody in the crowd said, 'You're right, we're behind you.'

"Did I pray, or did Ralph (Abernathy)?"

"Ralph prayed that day and we had to close our eyes and I just knew they were going to drop on us. Ralph said he prayed with his eyes open."

That's it, isn't it? Sometimes like Martin King you get peace and

strength and you respond to life and danger according to the great traditions and predictable behavior—even in danger it's "every head bowed and every eye closed." But sometimes like Ralph Abernathy the forces of evil and the cold fear of danger are too great and you improvise like mad—you pray with your eyes wide open, watching all around. But you keep on praying and perhaps with luck or grace you learn what Paul knew when he wrote so audaciously:

Hard pressed on every side, we are never hemmed in; bewildered, we are never at our wit's end; hunted, we are never abandoned to our fate; struck down, we are not left to die. Wherever we go we carry death with us, the death that Jesus died; that in this body also life may reveal itself, the life that Jesus lives. (II Cor. 4:7-12)

And what about the rest of us? Are we able to stand alone with grace and improvise when necessary? We are called, we say, priests every one, by faith in Christ Jesus. Sometimes within the church and sometimes without it we have been overtaken by grace and we sensed that something was calling us to the sick and the unclean, the dying and the broken, all that. And we weren't always sure we'd heard it right or that we knew what we were doing, but we finally said out loud, "Yes, Lord, I will follow you wherever you are going."

So here we sit, earthen vessels everyone, through whom God sometimes shows forth grace for lack of more stable constituency. Sooner or later every one of use will have to improvise, hoping against hope that when the time comes we will open our mouths and our lives and the Spirit will speak and act through us of grace and goodness to male or female, slave or free, Palestinian or Israeli, Capitalist or Communist, Liberal or Fundamentalist. You see, we all sit here this evening, waiting, hoping for grace to happen to us.

It has happened before:

To Martin Luther, Wittenberg, contending for the faith, waiting on Reformation;

To Sister Lottie Moon, dying of malnutrition off the China coast, waiting on the Kingdom;

To a communion of saints in San Antonio, Texas, torn apart by Bible controversies and power politics, waiting on the Word.

And to a stone-cold Galilean, waiting in borrowed tomb, waiting on the Father to improvise his grace.

**For immediate release after 8 PM, Sunday, June 12, 1988**

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## **"Going Home by a Different Way"**

**(Matthew 1:1-12)**

by **Libby S. Bellinger**

I sat beside the bed of an 87 year old black woman as she lay dying. My back ached from holding her hand and fatigue settled upon my shoulders.

She had verbally wandered all afternoon from place to place, person to person and back again. Her journey toward death seemed endless. She seemed lost and desolate.

I confess to you that my mind had shifted into neutral and I had stopped listening to her wanderings. And then as so often happens when we stop the laying on of ears, her words slapped me to attention.

She looked at me directly with recognition and said, "Rev. Libby, I'm going home, I'm going home." I pastorally echoed her words and she said again "I'm going home, I'm going home a different way but I'm going home."

She drifted off again on her move toward death and shortly thereafter went home to be with her Lord. Her words haunted me. "I'm going home a different way." Was she mentally going to the home of her childhood. Perhaps the home of her years as a bride and young mother? Was she returning to the home she left before entering the nursing center? Or was the way to heaven different than she had imagined, than we all imagine, and was she sharing that insight with me? Going home, but home by a

different way. I can't answer my questions, but they did start me thinking.

"Home." We all have images of home, most of them positive. Home is where they want you. You can more or less assume that you'll be welcomed in the end. Home is a source of security. However, home is not so much a place of residence as it is a quality of relationship. For the last eleven years, the SBC has seemed less and less like home. Conventional faces are not familiar anymore, and certainly not welcoming. Suspicious stares are met with suspicious stares; words are guarded and conversations contrived. We feel like unwelcome guests in our own home. Our sense of belonging is gone; our relationships have changed; our sense of security is missing.

The feeling of insecurity and discomfort extends beyond the annual gathering and radiates throughout the states and regions, to the mission fields home and abroad, to the institutions and agencies. Us vs. Them. Where is the sense of family we once had with each other? What is the cancer that spreads so killingly in our midst?

I read a passage of scripture this evening that is quite familiar to you all. The Magi, some oriental wise guys who traveled guided by a star. The goal they have in mind but needing aid, they stop to seek counsel from the local king. Herod was the authority in the area. He had been empowered by the Romans and the Jews. He'd be able to give them direction to the one they sought and then set them back upon their journey home. But the passage tells us that warned in a dream of Herod's scheme, they went home by a different way. Here in these familiar words in Luke I heard echoed the words of a dying woman of the meaning.

Herod offered nothing but death, to the Magi possibly, to the infant King certainly. He was a person infused with power and yet with such insecurity that any threat had to be dealt with swiftly and completely, whether family or friend. Threatened by the birth of a possible King, he had to have informants. He was troubled and when Herod was troubled, all of Jerusalem lived hard. He had to gather together all his henchmen for a private meeting in Atlanta so they'd have the same story to tell the local press when they asked what is this star? What does it mean? So they consulted the original manuscripts and pointed these eastern kings toward Bethlehem. He dispatched them to this town as spies and filled their minds with half truths in order to secure control.

Herod promised to worship but hatred ruled his heart. The Magi warned in a dream of Herod's scheme went home by a different way. They took away Herod's power, listened to their visions and sought a safe way to return home. You can picture them, servants in tow, loading up their camels and saying, "Let's get home another way." They knew Herod was not who he said he was. Their perceptions were changed. The evil was seen through the revelation given them and they were released from their obligation to honor the king and went home.

It isn't always easy to go home, especially if obstacles block the trail. The Magi would have had to take a very circuitous route in order not to be discovered by Herod's henchmen. It probably would have increased the length of their journey considerably but safety and familiarity would welcome them when they completed the pilgrimage.

The Magi had originally given power to Herod. They needed information from him; they needed direction. They found what they sought. But, then, warned in a dream of Herod's scheme, they went home by another way.

I was thinking of their need to get home and the image of Dorothy in The Wizard of Oz came to mind. You remember Dorothy and Toto? She missed the safety and comfort of home. All that was familiar, all those who loved her were there in Kansas. She had to get home. But how was she going to do it? How was she to find the way?

The Great and Powerful, Wonderful Wizard of Oz! Now those of us who have relished the viewing of this movie year after year, know that the Wizard wasn't a wizard. He was not great and powerful. He was just a man, another Kansan who had lost his way. His power, his might, came from Dorothy's perception of who he was. She reacted to his special effects, to all his smoke and flames and amplified voice. The press agent of Oz, good witch Glenda, had told Dorothy about him. The citizens of Oz confirmed her press release and Dorothy gave power to the Wizard so he could show her how to go home. Now fortunately for Dorothy this wizard was a good wizard and so he did her no harm and actually helped her friends claim their own power.

But, unfortunately this is not the case in real life. Did you know we have wizards in our midst? There is the Wizard of Houston, the Wizard of Dallas, the Wizard of Memphis, the Wizard of Atlanta. We give power to these wizards. We have our wizards here in Southern Baptist Oz. But one of the problems is that they are not good wizards, not Wizards of blessing and empowerment. They have taken the color picture and painted it black and white. The landscape no longer looks familiar

or inviting. Contrasts are dark and bleak. Our security is gone because all our relationships are called into question. Home has disappeared from the picture.

Like the Magi and Dorothy, we give wizards their power. It is our perception of who they are that gives them power. We believe the press releases we read. We believe the tapes we hear that spread the news of their universal plan for good. There is a book entitled the Never Ending Story and the kingdom in this story is being attacked. It is being eaten up, devoured by Nothingness. That is the way I feel about the SBC; it is being swallowed up in chunks by ugly, dark nothingness. Huge holes have appeared in what once was good and it is frightening.

Now let me be honest with you that the Convention was good before but not perfect. There are parts I would like to see swallowed up, but the growing nothingness that is slowly inching its way across is like a cancer slowly spreading out its ugly fingers. It is up to each one of us to be engaged in the search for its cure.

This convention's election may offer a possible remission, but the cells will still be present waiting to spread out the infection once again, if given free reign to do so.

So what can we do, you ask yourselves. As a beginning I feel we can affirm our traditions, our historical roots so to speak. Now let me emphasize when we link home, when we link security to an institution, our foundations are shaky. Whatever real security we find in this convention stems from God's presence. However, make no mistake about it; God's presence can be experienced in other conventions and other denominations.

Biblically speaking, secure persons have found tradition as a source of strength. Now I'm well aware that tradition can be a crippling burden. However, I also know that tradition can be an enabling incentive for us to deal with the Herods in our midst. We need to affirm: the priesthood of the believer, the autonomy of the local church, the need for servant leadership, the significance of adult believers' baptism.

People without tradition are deprived of a sense of continuity with the

past, or identity for the present, and ability to cope with the future. Now that doesn't mean we don't change and grow while hearing the leading of the spirit, but it does suggest that some realities endure and it is from these historical traditions that we get our strength and sense of home.

What I have just described has been a model for group response, but what about individually? Let me raise some possibilities. Avoid kingly audiences and big to-dos. Our call as ministers is to proclaim release to the captives, the oppressed and down trodden—not to hold church services while watching Super Bowl Sunday. Christ's life was one of simplicity, poverty and charity—and there is our model.

Remember with whom you are dealing. A king who would slaughter the innocents will not cut a deal for you. Ask yourselves, "what games am I playing in order to get that First Church pastorate or to keep my job at this institution." Where is your integrity? You are dealing with people who will comb your camel's fur until they find the trace of amounts of your frankincense, gold and myrrh. They will comb the books, pamphlets, monographs, speeches, prayers, sermons to find whatever they seek.

Now it is a miracle that I'm here tonight to preach this word to you. I should be silent if some people have their way. But the age of change is blowing through our convention. A spirit that I hope will change us into more Christ-like people of faith. It is a spirit of change that is going to require us to go home by a different way.

But remember, Herod's always out there and he's probably already got your card on file. The wizards know how to get you to give them power. It is a cinch, if you give an inch they are going to take a mile.

We are a pilgrim people. We have gotten this far guided by the star. The winds of change are blowing and we must seek counsel from above. In a crunch, when the pressure is on, and you must act courageously, or on an ordinary day, when in normal ways you simply must act honestly, remember that tradition—especially salvation history—is our source of strength and that faith in Jesus Christ will guide us home by a different way!

(with thanks to James Taylor)