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Clifford Reinhardt

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Faith on Earth¹

Pastor Clifford Reinhardt

*Spirit of Life Lutheran Church
Vancouver, British Columbia*

Text: Luke 18:1-8

Twenty-first Sunday After Pentecost

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. My sermon is a retelling of the parable that Jesus tells his disciples in our Gospel lesson – about the need to pray and not lose heart. I'm struck by what the judge says of himself: he says that he has no fear of God and no respect for anyone. And when he does act for the sake of righteousness, it's not because he is righteous. That colours the entire parable. God seems to be absent from this story ... or at least hidden. Maybe that's why Jesus concludes his story with a question: "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" So here's my retelling of Jesus' parable, in contemporary Metro Vancouver terms.

He slowly sipped his second cup of coffee while shuffling through the letters which his secretary had directed to his attention. She did that so well: picking through the volumes of daily mail and sorting with intuitive insight between those which she could deal with and those which, for political reasons, he should consider.

After all, in his life politics was everything, from his modest beginnings to this constituency office. "Member of Legislative Assembly" had a satisfying ring about it, especially since he had had to work so hard to achieve the distinction.

He had won his first election only the year before, and he had earned it. At great expense, he had hired people who knew the soul of the electorate. They were consummate professionals. They had helped him shape the various planks of his platform so that they appealed to and won the people who held the greatest influence in the riding. It was a credit to his handlers' skills, and a credit to his own shrewdness in hiring such talented people, that he had won a landslide victory in the election.

Of course, he dismissed these aides shortly after the election. They had served their purpose and were no longer useful to him.

Here was a letter from his riding association president. She and a delegation of party faithful wanted to discuss some details of his campaign promises, especially in

light of party policies. He read the letter, and then read it again, carefully noting the slightly ominous overtones. He toyed with his pencil momentarily, considering and calculating, and then scribbled a few notes in the margin before setting it aside.

He sighed. The riding association – especially its female president – often proved to be a nuisance. They spouted loyalty to the party and its principles. They were inspired by his predecessor, a man of noble character and dedicated service. They simply didn't understand this particular MLA's needs.

But he did not ignore the letter. It was part of the reality he had to deal with in order to achieve his own ends.

The next letter was altogether different. Although the return address was local, it was headed by a foreign-looking name.

In the stilted English of one who has learned it as a second language, the writer explained that her husband had died suddenly and tragically. They had immigrated within the last year: only she and her husband and their one, young child had come – no other family members. He had been a lay pastor. He had come to serve a small Christian congregation in a poor ethnic neighbourhood.

His salary had been very small, and because they had barely had time to get settled in this country, they had not saved any money. And now, with her husband's death, she was facing a very desperate situation: her husband had died without a will. In the land from which they had come, women did not have the right of inheritance. Widows were expected to return to their fathers' households. She was confused and uncertain about the laws in this country. In any case, she couldn't return to her father's household, because she could not afford the journey back to her homeland.

There was some problem with the legal processing of the estate. Their assets (as trifling as they were) had been frozen. She had barely been able to afford the humblest of funerals, and now her resources were virtually exhausted. To make a bad situation worse, there was some problem with securing any form of social assistance. She wasn't sure that she understood it.

Could he help her in any way?

He read the letter again, carefully considering her words and their implications. He was well aware that in some parts of his riding immigrants were resented. Indeed, his election victory had been so complete because he had correctly read the situation, and had shaped his campaign promises accordingly. He wasn't too eager to help this widow – not because he himself was in any way racist. On the contrary, he was pleased to assist anyone if that would help promote his career.

The fact that she was suddenly widowed didn't move him. Things like that happened to lots of people. She would get over it. Neither was he moved by the fact that she was Christian. Although he had come from a nominally Christian

background, the church didn't command his loyalty. Actually he was suspicious of the church, but didn't reveal this to anyone because he thought it wasn't prudent. In light of all the bad publicity of self-serving TV evangelists, scandal-ridden residential schools, and church hierarchies that failed to discipline their clergy, he thought it was expedient simply to maintain distance from any organised church. Of course, that policy could change if it had to.

He set the letter aside and turned to more important matters. Several days later, during a flurry of telephone calls, his secretary said that she had a call from a woman; the secretary cited a familiar sounding name. She had phoned earlier in the day, but his secretary had deflected the call, saying that she was sorry but the MLA was very busy that morning. Now she was calling again, and insisted that he speak with her. He sighed, but said that he would take the call.

The woman gave her name once again and asked if he had received her letter. She had written him about her desperate personal plight. As he shuffled through the papers on his desk, he said that he had indeed received it and had read it and was very concerned, but wasn't sure just what he could do to help.

She seemed to struggle for words, and then, with a quaver in her voice, asked if she could come in to see him. She wanted to explain her dilemma personally. He replied that he had a very busy schedule, and doubted if he could fit her in for several weeks.

There was a pause. And then she said in a low, quiet voice that she was simply desperate. For the love of God, here in this Christian country, couldn't he please help? He felt uneasy, but said, yes, maybe she should come around and see his secretary. Perhaps she could help her deal with the red tape. Once again, a pause. Then the female voice spoke a quiet but relieved "Thank you," and the phone call ended.

The next morning, she was already there when he came to his constituency office. Her appearance surprised him. Actually, he wasn't really sure just what he expected, but he was still taken aback by her youth. She looked to be in her mid-twenties. And she was lovely. When he had read in her letter that she was the widow of a Christian lay-pastor, he supposed that she would look rather plain or severe.

She sat at the edge of her seat, following his entrance with hopeful eyes. He smiled his perfectly orthodontic, charming smile at her, said "Good morning," threw a pointed glance at his secretary, and quickly walked to his inner office. But when he tried to close the door behind him, he discovered that the widow had followed him. He had no option but to offer her a seat.

She repeated what she had written in her letter. When she finished her story he said that he would indeed look into it. He also said that she shouldn't get her hopes up too high. These things often took time. He would get back to her when he had information for her. When the widow left, some of the desperation in her eyes had been replaced with something a little more hopeful.

The MLA turned to business more important to his political career.

A week later, she was back. She came at a bad time. The riding association president and the executive committee were meeting with the MLA in his office. The door suddenly swung open, and there she was. He could see his secretary frantically scrambling to get out from behind her desk, her face awash with panic.

What really caught his attention, however, was the widow. She looked very determined, perhaps even angry. It was a credit to his powers of observation that he caught this change in her attitude at all. For few men would have got beyond what else was there: she was simply stunning. Whereas before she had dressed very modestly (almost prudishly), as befit women of her culture and station in life, now her attire was alluring, and her make-up seductive. In her distinctively foreign accent, she demanded to speak with him.

The MLA was only too aware of the president and the executive committee of the riding association. Their eyes darted back and forth between him and the widow. The president raised her eyebrows at him, and excused herself and the executive. They would wait outside, she said, until he was available.

The widow seated herself in front of his desk. Her moves looked rehearsed, lacking natural grace. She used every trick to keep his attention. She leaned forward over the desk, and as she told her story yet again, some of her feigned composure peeled away, and she became once more the desperate, frightened woman who had visited his office the previous week.

He understood. She was shaming herself in service of her desperate mission. It didn't move him in any way, but it frightened him. He could easily imagine his riding association executive sitting out in the waiting room, exchanging questioning glances ... perhaps even the occasional smirk or leer.

He quickly promised the widow immediate action. He guaranteed her financial relief by the end of the week, underwritten by his own personal resources if necessary. Genuine gratitude suddenly relieved the widow of her role.

In sudden self-consciousness, she shrank back from the desk. She tried to pull slinky material more completely around her youthful figure. Her face reddened deeply. She stumbled over her words of thanks, quickly excused herself, and ran the gauntlet of disapproving stares in the waiting room. The MLA calculated frantically as the executive committee of the riding association filed grimly back into his office.

A week later, he received a final letter concerning the matter. It was from one of the elders of the church served by the late pastor. The elder explained that in his convictions, *God was ruler over all. God provided everything for his people, including public officials who were called to govern people in accordance with his will.*

He thanked the MLA for his kind and timely intervention in this tragic matter. *Praise God, he wrote, that God rules here in this land. Praise God for so selfless and*

honourable a man as you, dear MLA. Praise God that he provides for his people, and appoints rulers who will help the helpless, and restore justice and fairness.

As the MLA looked up from the letter and wondered how all this had affected his political capital, a young widow knelt before an altar somewhere, beneath the image of the crucified Jesus Christ, and in her native tongue whispered these words from the psalms:

*Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD. LORD, hear my voice!
Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!
If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, LORD, who could stand?
But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered.
I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope;
my soul waits for the LORD more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.
O Israel, hope in the LORD from this time on and forevermore.*

Endnotes

- 1 This sermon was preached on October 17, 2010, at Spirit of Life Lutheran Church in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.