

## Line of Defense

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



Luke 16:19-31

I have twice had the privilege of touring the battlefields and beaches of Normandy, France – the scene of perhaps the greatest naval and air invasion in the history of warfare – the Normandy Invasion begun on June 6, 1944 – D-Day. The turning point of World War II. Every stop in Normandy is an overwhelming experience – and the scale of human sacrifice laid upon those beaches and within those hedgerows is humbling. One cannot walk away without a profound sense of gratitude for what price has been paid for the freedoms we so casually enjoy.

Perhaps one of the most impressive parts of touring Normandy is to see the remnants of the extensive and intricate fortifications of defense laid out by Field Marshall Rommel and the German Army. Miles and miles in every direction the Germans built bunker after bunker, gun encasement after gun encasement, cement fortresses from which to repel the Allied advance. Years it took to construct this concrete line of defense – only to have it overrun in a matter of several hours as the Allied Armada came to shore and pushed ahead. Today in Normandy you have the chance to walk within and around these German “strongholds” and fortifications and to feel how desperate the Nazis were to hold on to this land they had stolen from free peoples. On one of my visits while walking the bluffs of Omaha Beach I took the chance to stand where once a German soldier stood in a small machine gun bunker with a perfect view out onto the English Channel and imagined what must have gone through his mind when early on that sixth day of June he saw appear out of the mist – the Allied invasion of some 500,000 soldiers. It’s not always good, is it, to be in a defensive posture?

And it got me to thinking some about being on the defensive. And I began to wonder about what lines of defense that maybe I had managed in my life to put

around myself. What territory had I claimed in my mind, my heart, my soul – that I was now outlining with bunkers and encasements such as to prevent the invasion of some outside force?

It is one of the things that goes with being a human being, isn’t it? We have a propensity of being defensive. Ever since we were young we have put ourselves on the defense. When I was a boy my little gang of friends used to play war. And war was all about protecting your turf. When you were young you remember when mom or dad caught you doing something you weren’t supposed to be doing ... was there not something instinctive within you to go on the defensive – to make an excuse, to deny culpability, to explain why you had to do it, or to show that you weren’t the one who started it. I think the older we get the more defensive we get. Each year brings a little more solidification in the things we believe and the things we hold opinions about. We claim our turf in mind, heart and soul ... and we build our bunkers and we mount our guns ... and we establish our lines of defense around those things we have claimed.

We have our political defenses. We have our theological defenses. We have our emotional defenses. We have our spiritual defenses. We have our relational defenses. We have our intellectual defenses. And we fortify ourselves against whatever outside forces that may be off shore that wish to come and change us. I guess that’s why they say never bring up religion and politics in “polite conversation”. Why? Because that’s when people get defensive - and sometimes offensive - and it has its way of spoiling a good dinner party.

Being on the defensive I suspect is something good to have in mind when we open up our Bibles. Christians, and certainly Presbyterians, have said for a long time that the Bible is the word of God – that God is trying to speak to us through the Bible. And God knows what he’s trying to tell us. Likely God is trying tell us different things – because we all come from different places and we all have our different issues. Nevertheless, we presuppose that God might have something to say. And what might that be? When you open the Bible – what do you imagine is going to happen? What cat will come out of this bag? What horse will leave this barn? What force will be

unleashed? Do you expect that something is going to happen? Do you imagine that the consequence of you opening up the Bible will be some inalterable change in your life? Or is the Bible not that kind of book? Is the Bible like the collected works of Shakespeare? Lovely sentiment ... intriguing drama ... compelling truths --- but in the end nothing there that will really change us.

A part of it might go to the kind of defenses we’ve put up. We may think and say that the Bible is a life-changing book but it might be that we have done so well with our defenses, constructed the impenetrable wall, built high the fortress, that there just isn’t much chance for the invading force to make its way in.

I wonder about that in preparing to read this morning another one of Jesus’ parables. Now the definition of a parable is a story that is being told about you, but it takes you a while to figure out what about you is being told. Parables are jokes about you – and sometimes it takes a while to figure out what part of you the joke is about. It’s kind of like Presbyterian minister jokes. I think I’ve heard them all. Laughed politely at all of them. And realized that in each of them there is a little bit of truth. Jesus starts this story

“The gospel turns into good news only when we let our defenses down enough to let the armada of grace come to shore.”

and says, “There was a rich man ...” Now I don’t know how many times I have read this story and it did not dawn on me that the rich man was me! That this story was being told about that part of me. Every time I read this story I thought about other people who had more money than me and I imagined that Jesus was talking about them and I, as a preacher, couldn’t wait to point the finger at them. I had built my defenses around my own wealth erected my fortress around my financial affairs that I had convinced myself that Jesus really couldn’t be talking about me. I had repelled the

invading force. Now of course the truth is I am one of the richest people in the world. No, I did not win the lottery. I just happen to have a salary that probably is about 8 times the world-wide average. 8 times. So when Jesus starts his story and says, “There was a rich man ...” the story, it turns out, is about me.

What about you? What part of this story is about you? Let’s have a read: Luke 16: 19-31.

It may be hitting close to home for Jesus to tell us Floridians a story about a man living in a gated community. And it may be that fact alone that wakes us up when we hear this story. And I suppose it would be a big mistake for any of us to think that since I don’t live in a gated community this story has nothing for me. (Full disclosure – I live in a gated community.) The truth is the rich man has got himself a defense. And it is a good enough defense for him not to consider this sick man outside his gate. And we hear the story and we say, “What kind of man is this to ignore the sick man?” And that’s the thing about defenses – they have their way of keeping us from seeing what should be as plain as the nose on our face. So you can get yourself, for example, in a political argument these days and be so defensive as

to not see that your conversation partner is actually talking a little sense. She actually has a good point. God forbid you recognize that. I got myself into a little texting Theological argument this week with a friend – note to self - texting Theological arguments don’t usually turn out very well. Later I scrolled back and read the argument and was impressed by how little I was listening, and how angry I was to be not the guy who was making some sense. He had something for me to hear but I couldn’t hear it because I had built this wall that wouldn’t allow me to.

So the gospel turns into good news only when we let our defenses down enough to let the armada of grace come to shore.

Martin McGuinness died this week. You probably read a little bit about Martin McGuinness. Martin McGuinness was for quite a while a leader in the Irish Republican Army. He likely conspired in many attacks against British Protestants. He was radical in his beliefs and deadly in his pursuit of them. But that's the first half of the story. The second half of the story is Martin McGuinness serving as one of the key brokers in the Good Friday peace agreement between the Irish and the British that for the most part put an end to the Troubles of which he among many was an instigator. Radical terrorist – Peace broker. Somewhere in the between some invading force penetrated. Few know what, few know when. But somehow the defenses went down and a man allowed himself to be changed – and a greater good came as a result.

The New Testament pulls no punches when it tells us of a religious terrorist named Saul who rounded up the early Christians and got them jailed and stoned and killed. A bad dude. But somewhere along the way the defenses went down and the voice got heard and the light got in – and Saul became Paul – apostle to the Gentiles – author of half the New Testament.

C.S. Lewis spent the first 30 years of his life defending himself against the possibility of the existence of God. But little by little, book by book, friend by friend – the defenses went down enough for him to actually consider the possibility. And then in his autobiography *Surprised by Joy* he writes:

“You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.

I did not then see what is now the most shining and obvious thing; the Divine humility which will accept a convert even on such terms. The Prodigal Son at least walked home on his own feet. But who can duly adore

that Love which will open the high gates to a prodigal who is brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance of escape?”

Are you resisting the invading force of grace? Is there some change that God has in store for you ... some new life he wants to give you ... .but you are holding onto whatever it is you're holding onto? Is it possible that for the rich man in the purple robes ... that the invading force of grace was the poor man at his gate? And if only he had let him in ... if only he had seen the eternal connection ... he would have found the glory of God.

Lewis later writes: “There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘Thy will be done.’ All that are in hell, choose it.

Is it possible in Jesus' parable that the rich man locked inside the defensiveness of his gates had already chosen his hell? Thinking that he had “arrived” at his place, position and opinion – was in fact a dead end. He had grown content in his own making and doing and pleasure. He had created his own righteousness. His own line of defense.

Remember that story by Flannery O'Connor ... *Revelation* it's called. It's about a southern woman Mrs. Turpin who has a pretty clear view of everybody else's faults. Who has been given the spiritual gift of judging how good or not good her friends, neighbors and enemies are. It's a defensive measure to keep secure her own prejudices. It's this outer shell that she puts up to protect herself. And at the end of the story she has this vision of a line of people going up to heaven ... as if on Jacob's ladder. And she sees at the beginning of the line all those people she never dreamed would ever go to heaven. All the people from all her prejudices. And then she sees at the end of the line ... as of the last to get in ... people such as herself ... who believed like she believed and who were good like she was good. O'Connor writes: “They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away.”

I'm wondering about my defenses. I'm wondering about all those barriers I put up to the grace of God. I'm wondering about my wealth ... and all those trappings of self-sufficiency. I'm wondering about all my self-perceived virtues that need to be burned away ... my fortresses of lifestyle and opinion that need to be surrendered. I'm wondering about the gates I lock myself in ... the defenses that keep out the poor – those people to whom I am linked eternally. Because the truth is ... the armada of grace is upon the shore in Jesus Christ – he has come to capture me. He has come to capture you. All of me and all of you. It's time to lay down the arms ... step out of our bunkers ... and surrender.



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Church of the Palms

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