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## "Get Low" the Gospel

**A sermon by the Rev. Thee Smith,  
Priest Assoc.**

*In the name of God: Our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend. Amen*

Did you notice that ending in today's gospel reading? Of course; we just heard it! It certainly ends in calamity for those who are called, "evildoers," doesn't it? "At the end of the age," St. Matthew declares,

At the end of the age . . . the Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!" (Matt. 13.43)

Well, I've been listening for a week now, and let me tell you what I hear. In Jesus' parable itself, as opposed to St. Matthew's interpretation of it, I hear a word of divine forbearance rather than calamity. Forbearance here means a temporary deferral or reprieve from judgment and calamity.

And that reminds me of last year's film starring Robert Duvall.

Like the theme of divine forbearance, the film is one that many people have not heard about. It's called, "Get Low." Now about that title before we go any further. It's invoked early in the film by Robert Duvall's character, a country recluse or small town hermit, Felix Bush. Felix uses "get low" as an idiom to mean "get buried," or to get your body put in the ground for burial. So "get low" is a quaint way of saying "get buried" getting "as low as you can go," so to speak.

You may already know that this kind of funeral humor has a long tradition. In fact some people enjoy the pastime of reading the epitaphs on old tombstones, where you can find some amusing examples of such humor; examples like these:

In a New Mexico cemetery:  
Here lies Johnny Yeast,. Pardon him  
for not rising.

Or"

In a cemetery in Hartscombe, England:  
On the 22nd of June, Jonathan Fiddle went  
out of tune.

And”

On a grave from the 1880s in Nantucket, Massachusetts:  
Under the sod and under the trees,  
Lies the body of Jonathan Pease.  
He is not here, there's only the pod.  
Pease shelled out and went to God.

Well, we don't have time for more examples like that. But I can't resist sharing some lighthearted gender warfare that you can find in epitaphs of this sort. Consider this forlorn declaration that an elderly woman included not on her tombstone, but in her handwritten instructions for her funeral service. Having never married she requested to have only female pallbearers carry her coffin out of the church, explaining that,

“Men wouldn't take me out while I was alive. “I don't want them to take me out when I'm dead.’  
[www.wordpress.com; The Family Plot; Funeral Jokes; July 6, 2011, 5:43 pm. Filed under: Gallows Humor  
| Tags: funerals, humor ]

Now we don't know for sure, of course, but it's likely that this older woman never got to enjoy the reaction of her community to her wit and her pique against men. But that's where the film "Get Low" provides its most effective plot device.

Because in "Get Low," Robert Duvall's character, Felix Bush, breaks his hermit's routine for the past forty years by riding his mule into town and, “out of the clear blue sky,' walking into the funeral parlor to make arrangements to have his funeral occur before he dies”evidently, as he says, so that he can hear and enjoy all the reactionary things that people have been saying about him over the decades!

As it happens the undertaker, cast as the unlikely but brilliant comic Bill Murray, has just been lamenting the lack of business in town. In his opening scene he asks his mortuary assistant,

“Did you read the paper today? People are dying everywhere in bunches but here. What do you do when people won't die?

Of course, this is an otherwise happy state of affairs for the people who don't die, and for their families! But it is “not a pretty picture, as they say, for an undertaker. It means financial hardship for Bill Murray's character, Frank Quinn.

That's why he responds with every fiber of his entrepreneurial soul to Felix's request for a “living funeral.' Because Felix wants a funeral right away, not months or years from now. "You have to be deceased to have a funeral," the assistant responds at first to Bush's extraordinary request. “It's a detail," Quinn hastens to reassure Felix and make the sale.

He then eagerly joins Felix in devising a clever scheme to bring out the maximum number of people to attend his living funeral, and even to generate cash income based on selling tickets to as large a number of people as possible from the surrounding region.

Up to this point, by the way, the film follows the true story of the life of Felix "Bush" Breazeale. Breazeale was a Tennessee bachelor who did in fact hold a “living funeral' for himself more than a hundred years ago. It was held on June 26, 1838, and at that time was one of the most massively attended events in the nation's history and highly publicized in the press afterwards.

It's at this point, however, that the film departs from strict biography and develops a story of its own. It appears that Felix has a long forgotten relationship to a local widow, played by Sissy Spacek. Spacek's character, Mattie, has known Felix for all the years of his hermitage and before, and has unfinished business with him. Indeed she and Felix still share emotional ties to an intimate past. That past involved a love triangle between the two of them and Mattie's sister. It's a story that also involves the burning house that mysteriously and skillfully dominates the very first scene at the beginning of the film. [Synopsis adapted from [www.examiner.com/celebrity-q-a-in-national/bill-murray-and-sissy-spacek-lift-their-get-low-experiences-with-humor](http://www.examiner.com/celebrity-q-a-in-national/bill-murray-and-sissy-spacek-lift-their-get-low-experiences-with-humor) ]

And here we come upon the central tragedy of the story. Without spoiling it for your future viewing let's say that there was something so tormenting has occurred in Felix's past that it has taken him decades to find his way through to redemption. But it is a redemption that the decades alone have still not brought him. However, he finally foresees that it might be possible if he can somehow stage his own funeral before he dies. It's a "'get out of jail' funeral, the undertaker Frank Quinn calls it at one point.

But there's something more here, something that haunts the viewer even after the film's climactic scenes. It's the question whether all those decades of a hermit's isolation and loneliness were necessary, or whether the redemption that Felix seeks could have occurred without them. Were they wasted years, or are they somehow a necessary ingredient in the quest for redemption that is what the film is really about? Maybe the plot device of a living funeral is really just a way to hook us into paying attention to something key about the nature of redemption.

And that haunting question brings us to Jesus' own version of the parable quoted in our gospel appointed for today.

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Jesus put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away.

So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well.

And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?'

He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?'

But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them.

Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'" (Matt. 13.24-30)

And now consider the following re-telling of that parable with a similar plotline. That is, "'Hear now the parable of "Get Low."

The "'kingdom of heaven' may be compared to someone like Felix Bush in the film, "Get Low." Felix was like so many of us who start out in life with a good heart and best intentions. But, again like many of us, while no one was looking the "'enemy of our souls' came and sowed weeds of passion and excess in Felix's heart, and then left him to live out that evil crop according to his own devices; according to his deceitful desires and willful choices.

Eventually then the dreams and schemes of his life ripened, both good and evil. As it happened in the film, he was also a master craftsman distinguished for his woodworking skills. He even built a beautiful church known by people throughout that region. But also the harvest of his sinful choices came to fruition. And that harvest ignited one night into the flames of the burning house that appears in the first scene of the film.

But those literal flames continue to burn during the next forty years of Felix's self-imposed captivity""a spiritual slow burn that begins to consume the "'weeds' in his life. Indeed like the poet Virgil in Dante's Divine Comedy he seeks to find passage from that inferno and""grace permitting""to transition through his personal purgatorio into a barely hoped for

paradiso.

For the forty lonesome years of that passage Felix is captive in a hermitage of remorse and self-loathing that he occasionally acts-out on others, gaining the reputation of being a vicious, mean spirited and ill-tempered old man: more weeds to be "'bundled' and "'burned' before any "'wheat' can be harvested in his life. And precisely here, as his life nears its end and he senses his own death approaching, we can hear the meditations of his soul sounding remarkably like the prayers and other scriptures appointed for our consideration alongside the gospel reading for today.

Beginning with our opening prayer we can hear the soul of Felix Bush crying out in the words of our Collect for this Sunday:

**The Collect of the Day**

Almighty God, the fountain of all wisdom, you know our necessities before we ask and our ignorance in asking: Have compassion on our weakness, and mercifully give us those things which for our unworthiness we dare not, and for our blindness we cannot ask; through the worthiness of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord . . .

Likewise in our psalm appointed for today, the classic confessional Psalm 139, we can hear this deep intoning in the soul of Felix Bush:

1 Lord, you have searched me out and known me . . .  
you discern my thoughts from afar.  
2 You trace my journeys and my resting-places,  
and are acquainted with all my ways . . .  
4 You press upon me behind and before  
and lay your hand upon me . . .  
6 Where can I go then from your Spirit?  
where can I flee from your presence?  
7 If I climb up to heaven, you are there;  
if I make the grave my bed, you are there also.  
10 If I say, "Surely the darkness will cover me,  
and the light around me turn to night,"  
11 Darkness is not dark to you;  
the night is as bright as the day;  
darkness and light to you are both alike . . .  
22 Search me out, O God, and know my heart;  
try me and know my restless thoughts.  
23 Look well whether there be any wickedness in me and lead me in the way that is everlasting. (Ps. 139.1-2, 4-6, 7-11, 22-23)

Thus we hear, not only in today's Collect but also in this psalm, a similar acknowledgment of our human mortality, our moral culpability, and a crying need for redemption that is implicit in Felix Bush's decision to hold a living funeral for himself.

Also remarkable is the resonance with today's reading from the Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans. Through Paul's writing we may discern in Felix Bush a similar impetus toward hope; a spiritual impetuosity that the apostle elsewhere calls "hoping against hope" (Rom. 4.18). Indeed, Paul's tribute to hope could have been preached as Felix's eulogy by the preacher excellently portrayed in the film, veteran African American actor, Bill Cobbs.

Cobbs is cast as Felix's backwoods confidant and chaplain of sorts, the Rev. Charlie Jackson. Through his persona we may infer the following exhortation, as if it were the concluding text delivered to the assembled congregation that day regarding

Felix's secret sin:

So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh""for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live . . .

Here we have an implicit testimony to the spiritual themes of life and death that correspond to the moral choices in our lives. In that correspondence gross sin is experienced as a kind of moral death, and redemption from sin as a restoration to new life""by the Spirit," in St. Paul's terms. But in Paul's spirituality this acknowledgment of sin is not a morbid form of self-flagellation for, as he puts it:

For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God . . .

Moreover Paul's gospel is not a morbid introspection on the failings of our lives; rather, as he puts it:

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God;

Thus for Paul our suffering""groaning inwardly" he also calls it""conveys within it the spiritual longing for divine revelation. We are not alone in our suffering, he insists. For, ""in Christ,' human suffering gets reconstituted (Rom. 8.17) so that even Felix Bush's apparent self-imprisonment is eclipsed as the divine will. (Cf. Genesis 50.20, where outcomes experienced as evil are reconfigured by God for our good.) As Paul puts it:

for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God . . . and not only the creation, but we ourselves . . . groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

Thus our hypothetical eulogy for Felix Bush concludes with this tribute to hope:

For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen?  
But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. (Rom. 8.12-13, 15-16, 18-25)

Waiting with patience: in Felix Bush's case it was more like restless waiting. Nonetheless it worked. It worked because the grace of God""and also, in this case, the filmmaker's script""is not wrathful, calamitous, and precipitous toward final judgment (cf. Matthew's rendering of Jesus' parable, Matt. 13.36-43). Rather the ""good news' of the gospel is the news of divine forbearance: the news that God patiently waits for us""allowing our ""weeds and wheat grow together,' just as God also waits for all creation to find its way to a "revealing of the children of God" (Rom. 8.19) and to obtaining "the freedom of the glory of the children of glory" (Rom. 8.21).

Perhaps some of that "glory" visibly illumines Felix Bush in the closing scene of the film. Again, I won't spoil it for you; you'll have to check it out. See for yourself, and let me know what you think. But as your preacher for today I declare: this gospel ""good news' is yours for the asking, and yours for proclaiming to others. Wherever in our experience people need divine forbearance to wait for us, as our ""weeds and wheat' grow together and we work our way through to redemption,

the gospel declares that the grace of God says, "Yes!"

So I invite you: when you get an opportunity to view "Get Low" the film (preview at [www.GetLowTheFilm.com](http://www.GetLowTheFilm.com)), tell me whether you see any resemblance to the version we have shared here today "Get Low' the Gospel" as I call it. And my prayer for us and for all is that we take full advantage of that grace of God that awaits us, wherever and whenever we are ready and willing to receive it.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

#### Afterword

Last week during summer travel in Ghana, West Africa, I discovered a related exhortation from another old man in our African American wisdom tradition, the black scholar-activist W.E.B. DuBois. Born in New England in 1868, just after the Civil War, DuBois famously lived to be ninety-five years old. Upon the 1903 publication of his epochal *Souls of Black Folk* he was already a civil rights activist (post-Reconstruction) and a founding leader of the NAACP. After the two World Wars and when he died in 1963 in Ghana, by the way! he had either led or witnessed nearly all of the major developments in race relations that followed Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation.

"One thing I charge you," DuBois wrote as he prepared to "get low" in the last year of his life.

One thing I charge you. As you live, believe in Life! Always human beings will live and progress to greater, broader and fuller life. The only possible death is to lose belief in this truth simply because the great end comes slowly, because time is long.

Given his longevity and persistent activism, DuBois was eminently qualified to testify that it is spiritual death to stop believing in "greater life . . . simply because the great end comes slowly, because time is long." Of course, we Christians believe that the trajectory to "greater life" is most fully realized not by the inevitability of human progress, but rather by the resurrection life revealed and made available to us by the grace of God as manifest "in Christ." Nonetheless DuBois's dedicated humanism is not antithetical to the Christian gospel (cf. so-called "natural religion," and Anthony Pinn, *African American Humanist Principles*, 2004), and remains an enduring tribute to the dignity and valor of the human spirit.