

St Augustine's Sermon  
October 17, 2010

## Stewardship

*by Chris McColl*

I'd like to begin by inviting the congregation into the dark secrets and lunacy that lurk behind the walls of my family's quaint suburban home. If truth is told, my wife and daughters and I engage in many peculiar practices, odd ritual dances, invocations of mystic forces via long-forgotten incantations of gibberish, and such like. I won't risk upsetting those assembled church-goers of a more sensitive disposition by revealing more than one such practice this morning. And I reveal the one only because I must.

You see, I must speak a particular word which inevitably causes a knee-jerk reaction in my nearest and dearest. For reasons which are far too uninteresting to explain (and which still wouldn't amount to much of an explanation even if I did explain), whenever members of our household hear the word "journey" spoken, if it is not overly intrusive (or at least not irreparably intrusive), we all shout "JOURNEY!" in unison. So, I ask you to help me get this out of my family's system. Please repeat after me: "JOURNEY!"

*(the congregation says, "JOURNEY!")*

Well done. I bring this word up because I've been thinking about the very first time I was asked to speak to a group of people in a religious setting. Twenty years ago, in my first year at St

Albans Episcopal School for Boys in Washington, DC (my original St A's), the chaplain Roger Bowen asked me and my fellow first-year teachers to present chapel talks to the boys under the subject, "My Spiritual Journey."

*(the congregation says "JOURNEY!")* I won't make you do that again.

I remember wondering if Roger wanted to reconsider, since my spiritual journey had been a frenetic, distracted and anxious one, plagued by side-trips and uncertainties. I knew people who wrestled with faith like it was thumb-wrestling. When I wrestled with faith it felt like alligator-wrestling.

Let me explain: I was raised in a retrogressively Catholic household which despaired that Vatican II had ever come to pass. As a freshman in high school, I read *The Tao of Pooh*. In my junior year, I took courses at a local college that encouraged me to experiment with pantheism, rational humanism and other epistemologies. As you're undoubtedly all aware, these are known gateway concepts, and eventually, I did end up sampling harder and more life-threatening philosophies at college. I also began spending time with hard-core Jewish students at my school, attending their pre-Shabat onegs and learning what Hebrew I could from them (aleph, bet, gimmel, doled, hay, vov, sein,...). I read *Godel, Escher, Bach*, and Buddhist koans and *The Wisdom of Lao-tze*.

In the end, I had collected lots of postcards from my spiritual journey, but I had absolutely no clue where I was going. I had traveled far and wide without reaching any destination. Thus, Roger asking me to speak felt a lot like giving a ten-year-old with severe ADD a two-liter bottle of Coke and telling him to go meet his sister on the other side of DisneyWorld.

In fact, I've always been an anxious, uncertain traveler. I make my wife and family absolutely mental any time we have to catch a plane: we have to be at the airport four hours ahead of time – we're late! They've called our seat number for boarding – get in line! Once I'm ON the actual plane, I'm better, and once the plane arrives at our destination, I'm completely fine. But the trip to the transportation, and the transportation itself, make me jittery and cranky and sick to my stomach and utterly deplete all the adrenaline my body stores up to use on irrational fears. Partly it's a control thing – if I'm not the one driving the bus, I wrestle with my faith in the bus driver.

I should interject here that when traveling by ship rather than plane, I experience no such uncertainty. I've crossed the Atlantic by ship three times in my life, between England and America, like the pilgrims. Transatlantic ships are different – more than a means of getting from A to B, they are a destination in themselves. You spend a week eating delicious food and having the steward take you to the onboard library so you can find the answers to the day's shipwide trivia contest and playing cards and chatting with the lovely people seated next to you at breakfast and agreeing to buy a round of drinks for them at the pub quiz later in the afternoon and visiting the spa and letting the purser's yeoman transform what you thought was a bit of decking into a very comfortable chaise lounge in which you can lie and inhale the improving sea air with a glass of port and the next thing you know you're in an entirely different part of the world. Ship travel never agitates me the way plane travel does. Go figure.

Although, maybe the fact that I can see all the water I'm crossing and feel all the time it takes to cross the water helps me not to freak out. Maybe part of my problem with plane travel is just making the journey. I like to FEEL all the distance between where I am and where I'm going. I like to read all the signs at the side of the road, admire all the scenery, window-shop at all the local stores. In exploring ways to see the world, Michael Palin once said, "Air travel is just another way of

seeing airports.” I couldn’t agree more. Sometimes the discoveries you make on your journey are as good as – or even better than – your destination.

I remember a spring-break road trip I took with my college roommate to Myrtle Beach. We were supposed to meet up there with a couple of friends for a week of behaving like college students. It was an utterly boring, forgettable trip--except for one detail. And this detail is so delicious to me that I still feel a giddy tickle every time I think about it:

Driving across the border from Virginia into North Carolina, we stopped at the first rest area in the state. While my roommate Paul pumped quarters into machines for food and drink to sustain us en route, I looked through the wall full of brochures advertising the many and myriad wonders North Carolina had to offer the adventurous traveler.

One pamphlet stopped me in my tracks. I picked it up, read it, put it down, then picked it up and read it again to be sure it was real. I took it with me. I still have it, I think, buried in the bottom of a box on the floor of a closet in our house, beneath the other paraphernalia of my family’s peculiar rituals.

The pamphlet advertised the very rest stop in which I stood. It proudly boasted the “largest single collection of North Carolina tourist information statewide,” and described a few of the amenities awaiting travelers. Naturally, my mind went wild considering this odd piece of paper, because I was, at that time, under the influence of a variety of powerful belief systems. It occurred to me, if the pamphlet were truly complete, as such things often are in philosophical thought-experiments, then it would contain all the information in all the pamphlets in the rest stop. Thus, they could just hand the rest-stop pamphlets out to passers-by from a dispenser and do away with the rest-stop itself. Though, if they did, the rest-stop pamphlet would have no rest-stop to describe

and so it couldn't exist. And without the pamphlet and its tourist information, they'd need to bring back the rest-stop. Which would encourage the creation of the pamphlet. And so on, and so on.

I've always loved paradoxes like this. Around the same time I took that ill-fated road trip, I was making my way through the books of John Barth. In his novella, *Dunyazadiad*, he tells the story of young university graduate Scheherezade, she of the *Tales of a Thousand Nights and One*, trying to find a way to stop King Shahryar from taking a new wife every night and having her beheaded the next morning. A great scholar of the stories of Arabian antiquity, Sherry feels certain the key to solving the problem is her beloved literature. She combs through story after story, trying to find the precedent that will stop her king's atrocities. But she doesn't find the answer. She has the key to the treasure, but not the treasure. But a genie (who turns out to be John Barth himself) appears and helps her to realize that the stories themselves, told to the king in a captivating way, might well keep him from his killing spree. "The key to the treasure," they both realize, "is the treasure."

Like Scheherezade, I ultimately became a student of the world's great literature, and a particular fan of Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, about which I wrote my Master's Thesis. Many things about Chaucer appeal to me: he was perhaps the first writer in history (certainly in known Western literature) to make himself a character in his own stories, as Barth did many centuries later; though his characters were Catholic at the time, they travelled to Canterbury, which has since converted to the Church of England, our Episcopal Church, just as I've done; and his characters are in at least one respect, anxious travelers, because they're all going to Canterbury to atone for sins and to pray to St Thomas a Becket to make them better people, for fear that if they don't, things won't go so well for them when they are called to meet God.

But most interestingly, Chaucer's characters never get there. Scholars have debated the meaning of this for ages. Some say he simply died before he finished. That's certainly possible. More intriguing, though, is the theory that Chaucer never INTENDED to finish, that he never wanted his characters to arrive in Canterbury. Subscribers to this interpretation call the tales, paradoxically, "unfinished yet complete."

How could that be? you might ask. Well, for starters, Chaucer's ending for the book (written before the book was finished) never mentioned Canterbury. Beyond this, the book is called *Canterbury Tales*, so Canterbury is a given – the common, inevitable end to the journey all the pilgrims will share. That being the case, why bother writing it in? Putting the destination into the story would divert attention away from Chaucer's real aim: to draw us into the relationships, the lives, the dark secrets and the lunacy to be discovered within the community of pilgrims he has created. Though they are individuals, he refers to their jobs-- his Cook, his Merchant, his Scholar, his Wife, his Physician, his Man of Law, his Host, his Priest...even himself, Author and Storyteller. They are beautifully, imperfectly human, and he surprises us with the ways they contribute to the group; we learn to value these contributions and not to make assumptions based on status. He wants to make us all a part of their stories by making their stories part of us. If they had names, we'd simply say, "Oh, well that's just what she's like"; because they don't, we might be inclined to value all people we meet and allow them to surprise us. If the story had an end, we'd simply say, "Well, that's done now"; because it doesn't, the value we place on Chaucer's pilgrims—and thus on all people—doesn't end either. Chaucer's unfinished story reminds us that we, like all people, are unfinished, and thus can change. And we are imperfect, and SHOULD change.

Because Chaucer's book is a story of TRANSFORMATION. All kinds of transformation. We open with a lovely description of the transformation of winter into spring, as the drought of March is pierced to the root by April's sweet showers. We know the pilgrims want to transform

their sinful souls into souls that are pleasing in God's eyes; thus their beseeching of St Thomas. In the second to last tale, the Canon's Yeoman tells of the Canon's unsuccessful attempts to transform base metals into gold. And the last tale is actually a treatise by the Parson regarding how to transform our base lives into lives of grace. We do this, in essence, by avoiding actions that subtract from the warm communion of humanity, by loving those around us, friends and strangers alike, by valuing all they contribute to us, by showing kindness and compassion to those with whom we share life's journey and its common, inevitable end. This all-important transformation must happen DURING the journey, or else the end of the journey will have no meaning.

Put another way, Chaucer never gets to Canterbury because it turns out the journey IS the destination.

When Brad asked me to speak about stewardship today, he gave me a lovely quote from Paul's second letter to Timothy: "So that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work." I looked up the rest of the quote, and the sentence begins, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work." That's just gorgeous, that is. I practically swoon to think about "Scripture breathed out by God." Imagine simply exhaling and having inspiring verse slip out from amidst the CO2 molecules. Magnificent.

Reading it, though, I couldn't help but be reminded of Chaucer, in part because of the appropriation of the human concept of "profit" for holy purposes. The juxtaposition of money and of "training in righteousness" (what a phrase) felt a lot like the juxtaposition of Chaucer's alchemical Canon and his Parson. So I returned to my study of Chaucer.

Turns out, Chaucer was a big fan of Paul's letters to Timothy. His Pardoner quotes the first letter ("the love of money is the root of all evil") and the Wife of Bath quotes the second. But most astonishing to me was the realization that Chaucer's ending for his book, the piece that leaves the book complete but unfinished, uses the very quote Brad gave me--paraphrased, but the same idea:

"For our Good Book saith, 'All that is written is written for our doctrine,' and that is my intent. Wherefore I beseech you meekly, for the mercy of God, that you pray for me that Christ have mercy on me and forgive me my sins."

Three years ago, my wife, daughters and I arrived by ship from England. Not long after that we began wandering around our area looking for a church—call it a kind of "spiritual journey." We attended services at several. In general, we went unnoticed by people at these churches—my family was a curious shape formed in the clouds outside the religious flights taken by the congregations, another pamphlet in the overwhelming wall of pamphlets of their rest-stop. I mean no disrespect: these were good, strong places, with a clear sense of their identities. We could have chosen any one as our final destination, and this would have been fine.

Then we walked into St Augustine's. That Sunday, we arrived late and the service was nearly over. We had read your sign at the side of the road and gotten the service times wrong. Despite your ship having departed, you still welcomed us aboard. Everyone reached out to us, pointed out where to pick up the bulletin, where the books for little ones were; the lovely people seated next to us chatted with us. After the service, Brad and Kathie and Greg and Gwen and others saw us as strangers, invited us to eat and drink at Coffee Hour. People told us their stories, asked to hear ours. Brad offered to speak with us some evening to learn more about the church. Without knowing who we were, you invited us into the walls of your community's quaint suburban church, into your lives and your secrets and your lunacy. You made us your fellow pilgrims on life's journey.

We have felt good at St A's in a way we've never felt good in a church before. Looking back, I realize why. The other churches had fixed their identities. If we elected to visit there periodically, we might learn and grow through this exposure. Put another way, they were happy to have us ride their bus to our destination; however, they made it very clear who was driving the bus. Fundamentally, I see nothing wrong with this. But I can't help it – it made me anxious.

But St A's is a church that envisions its identity as a transforming one. Because St A's wants to take the good it knows and help make all things better amongst its members and the world, it sees the importance of its own continual transformation. Thus, when we walked in, it felt like St A's as an entity was saying, "Yes! Of course! Your family is another of the pieces we've been missing! It's so important that you're here now!" Like the *Tales*, St A's welcomes strangers to itself because it knows its congregation is "unfinished but complete."

This is what makes St A's special: you ARE my family's ship. Call it fellowship, or friendship, if you like. But all of you—all of us—are the stewards of that ship. You help to guide us and one another toward answers in a puzzling world. You do the yeoman's work of feeding one another, of offering drink to one another, of comforting the sad, of celebrating with the elated, of fighting for those facing injustice and hardship. And as you do it for one another within these walls, you do it for those beyond the walls.

As a result of our experience in St A's, some part of all of you travels with my family now wherever we go. Under your influence, we are transformed. We have found a treasure that we never expected.

I have to make a brief side-trip here. I mentioned that the sign out in front of St A's made us late – Brad joked that first day that he should probably have that fixed. But it too was one of the neat discoveries in our journey: a symbol, perhaps, of St A's awareness of its fallible humanity, of its

ability to change, of its starting point on the journey. I can't help but observe that, because it made us late, it also made us noticed. So, emblematically, maybe fixing the sign is another project that is unfinished, but complete.

I mention this symbol of fallible humanity because I recognize my responsibility to this astonishing community of pilgrims. I try, paradoxically, to join all of you in being both a passenger on your ship and a steward of that ship. And as Chaucer himself realized, the journeys of the soul always require the upkeep of the body - the individual body, the body of the congregation, and the body of our church itself. I see members of the parish donating their skills and time and talents. At times, the members of our pilgrim community become the Cooks, or the Physicians, or the Hosts, or the Men (or Women) of Law, or the Yeomen, or the Storytellers. Or even the Bus Drivers in whom we put our faith. Among you, I feel called to serve, to help equip St A's for every good work.

Similarly, like it or not, the chapter of our lives in which we address our transforming spiritual needs can only follow the chapter in which we address our financial needs. The food and drink and clothing and shelter with which we meet the needs of our community require money, the Canon's gold, the profit that we put toward training in righteousness. While some of us explore the tantalizing pamphlets describing sites along our spiritual journey, someone must pump quarters into the machine to sustain us all en route. We pay to fill our oxygen tanks with improving air in order to breathe out the words that teach us. Bottom line, as Barth would say, "Sometimes the key to the treasure is the treasure."

There are questions I ask myself often, as I'm sure most of you do: Could I do more? Could I give more? Perhaps. Probably. Yes. But, motivated and inspired by this church and by all of you, I strive continually to transform, to become better, knowing the paradox that the more I give away of myself, the bigger I become. My striving is not always successful, because I'm a fallible

human. But the key is the striving, the process, the journey. I know, because you have taught me, that if we properly nurture and care for our St A's community, then we make ourselves proficient, equip ourselves to nurture and care for all those beyond our community. Stewardship is, in the end, just another "ship" that carries all of us pilgrims, like friendship and fellowship. It is a ship that is a destination in itself, provided we all take part in the journey, that we take time to feel all the distance we cover, to chat over breakfast and to drink together at the pub quiz and to look for answers together. And to continue to give together in order to keep our ship, St A's, from ever reaching port.

A final word: I tried as best I could to put a big chunk of myself into this long ramble you've all just endured. I had high hopes for it, but I recognize, as Chaucer did, that I may have not arrived at my desired end. I had wanted to do more with the miracle of being bigger on the inside than the outside, like St A's. I would have talked about the TARDIS on *Doctor Who*, about M C Escher's *Print Gallery* (also a part of my Master's work). I wanted to describe my ideal print gallery to you. Even in my pew before the service I scribbled in places where I saw I fell short. Things I've said may sound random, or nonsensical, or irrelevant, or impertinent. If that is the case, I apologize, and I refer you to Mr. Chaucer: All that is written is written for our doctrine, for our education, to help us learn to be better. Please don't be upset by my facetious tone or the clumsy, vulgar or sarcastic things I've say. I beseech you meekly, for the mercy of God, that you pray for me that Christ have mercy on me and forgive me.

Thank you.