

**Dr. Wm. Richard Kremer**  
**October 26, 2008**  
[www.stjohnsbaptistchurch.org](http://www.stjohnsbaptistchurch.org)

**The Power of an Illusion**  
**Luke 12: 16-21**

Even now, some little kid will ask me, “Dr. Kremer, why is there a chain around that ladder in the gym?” I’ll answer, “There’s a good reason for that.”

Sometimes I’ll even tell the story of that day years ago when my daughter Clara was six, and my boys were eight, and it was a late summer day, and school had just started, and Melissa had gone down to Columbia to visit her folks.

I had picked the kids up from school, but there was some correspondence I felt

I just had to finish, so I said to the kids, “Go play in the gym while I finish my work.”

I had not been working long when my son Mark came running into my office to say, breathlessly, “Daddy, Stewart pulled down the ladder and it hit Clara.”

I sprang up immediately and ran down the hall, but I didn’t have the courage to ask if Clara was dead or alive.

I knew the ladder he was talking about.

There is a large extension ladder in the gym used for changing light bulbs; a large, heavy crow’s nest sits atop it. Little Clara had asked Stewart to pull the rope so she could watch the crow’s nest rise.

As he did so, a metal leg at the base gave way, and the great ladder toppled.

Nimble Stewart leaped to the side, and Mark screamed, “Run!”

but little Clara panicked and ran away in the same line as the ladder was falling.

Had it fallen a nanosecond quicker, that crow’s nest would have decapitated her or crushed her spine.

Instead, it simply nipped her calf. I looked through the slatted windows above the gym to see the ladder stretched all the way from the wall to half-court. Clara sat in a chair, crying, but otherwise unharmed.

In that moment I knew how God can sometimes simultaneously feel love and wrath toward us.

I wanted to hug them and scold in the same breath.

Of course, I was mainly angry at myself for not supervising my children better.

But Stewart and Clara were soon giggling about the incident, as children do

when then they know they’ve been lucky. Even so, as we were driving home Stewart said earnestly, “Daddy, if I had killed Clara, I would have killed myself, too.”

What do you do when your life has almost been shattered?

I said, “Forget your homework. Let’s go see a baseball game.”

Amidst hot dogs, popcorn, cracker jacks and peanuts, under a late-summer moon,

I relished the grace of a near-miss. But I also realized that I lived beguiled by an illusion.

The lesson I learned was similar to the one learned by Viktor Frankl,

a brilliant, young psychoanalyst, on the day he entered the compound at Auschwitz.

Frankl knew that he had escaped the gas chamber at least temporarily.

He knew that he was fortunate to be alive.

But his chief concern was preserving an academic article that he had written and sneaked past the guards.

He searched out an old prisoner and pointed to the roll of paper in his coat pocket and said,

“I want to keep this manuscript at all costs. Don’t you understand that?” The prisoner indeed understood.

A grin spread over his face, first piteous, then amused, mocking, insolent and judgmental.

He looked Frankl square in the face and said, “Shoot” – or, rather, a word that sounded like “shoot.”

In that moment Viktor Frankl realized that he had been beguiled by an illusion.  
In that moment he struck out all of his former life.

A rich man receives a bountiful harvest that exceeds even his own acquisitive dreams.  
What can he do with this bountiful blessing?  
He resolves, "I will tear down my barns. I will build bigger barns.  
Then I will be so rich that I'll never have another worry in my life. I can say to myself,  
'Eat, drink, be merry and take your ease.'"  
But God says, "Tonight, you fool, your soul is required of you.  
And what will all of your possessions profit you?"  
In that moment the rich man would know that he had lived beguiled by an illusion.

What is this illusion? It is the illusion that our lives are permanent.  
It is the illusion that all that we have, and all we are, and all we enjoy will always be ours to relish.  
It is the illusion that we will always be able to structure our lives in just the way we desire.  
It is the illusion that the blessings we enjoy will be ours to savor at our leisure.  
Here I was in my office fretting about work I felt I *had* to accomplish, secure in the knowledge  
that I was blessed with a beautiful wife, three wonderful children, great friends across this country  
who would do anything for me, sure that I was among the richest men on earth –  
yet I was a nanosecond away from having my entire world destroyed.  
Here was Viktor Frankl in one moment obsessing over his precious scientific manuscript, in the next  
beholding the pettiness of his concerns when juxtaposed against the annihilating evil of the Holocaust.  
Here was a rich man who had received a great blessing,  
and his concern was not, 'How can I benefit the community with my surfeit harvest?'  
His concern was, 'How can I feather my nest as to put myself beyond all material needs.'  
But God says to him, "You are a fool! You live beguiled by an illusion."

Our illusion is that we tend to regard our lives as a long, unbroken highway.  
We look down the span of our years and think, 'Oh, I have so much more time to enjoy my life.  
I have so many more years to enjoy my spouse. I have so much more time to enjoy my children.  
I have so many more years to enjoy all the blessings that I have accrued.'  
In truth, every blessing that we enjoy is transitory, given to us by God for the moment.  
We must treasure it in the moment, for that is all that we are promised.  
The rich man says, "I will tear down my barns and build bigger barns."  
He speaks for all of us. Because we all practice an illogical notion:  
'If I focus upon the impermanent frequently enough it will give me a sense of permanence.  
If I fixate upon material things that make me feel secure, I will substantiate my illusion of security.'  
Do you remember what incident provokes this parable from Jesus?  
It was an event as old as death, an inheritance dispute.  
One brother wants Jesus to adjudicate an inheritance battle between his brother and him.  
He is so sure that Jesus will see the merit of his argument and will rule in his favor.  
Instead, Jesus sweeps away the entire case and says,  
"You are fixated upon the wrong things, and that fixation is warping your soul.  
Lay up for yourself treasures in heaven."  
Perhaps many of our prayers are not answered by God because God is saying unto us,  
'You are fixated upon the wrong things -- and that fixation is warping your life.'  
It could be that in examining our fretting and fuming about so many inconsequential material matters  
God must sometimes sadly say unto us, 'You are a fool.'

I think of that popular book that made the rounds a few years ago, *Tuesdays with Morrie*, a nonfiction account of a celebrated young sports writer who re-establishes contact with his old mentor Morrie upon learning that his teacher is dying of Lou Gehrig's disease. The sports writer is reluctant to renew the friendship, knowing that he is no longer the young, idealistic altruist he once was. The professor has sensed the change. The professor one day says, "Mitch, can I tell you something?" The young man says, "Of course." His teacher observes, "The truth is, if you accept that you can die at any time – then you might not be as ambitious as you are. The things you spend so much time on --all this work you do – might not seem as important. You might have to make room for more spiritual things."

We live within a great and healthy dialectic. On the one hand, our lives are grass. Our lives are ephemeral and short. On the other hand, we are God's grass. We have been created out of God's intent and gifted by God with life. If we would truly fathom the meaning of our lives we would realize that our chief purpose is developing a relationship with this One who has granted us this blessing of existence. But one of the ironies of our lives is, even though we come from God and we go to God, we often spend the bulk of our lives immersed in trivial activities that have nothing to do with developing a closeness to the One with whom we will spend eternity. That is an illogical approach to existence.

A generation ago, a strange book with a weird title became a best seller. Its name? *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. In it, an English professor becomes so enraged by the antics of his college administration to reign in academic freedom that he invites a national accrediting agency to investigate his school. The national agency is sufficiently appalled that it threatens to remove the school's credentials. Some of the professor's students react angrily, charging the professor with hindering their education. A student tells the professor that the legislature should act to prevent the national agency from removing the school's accreditation. How would they do that? the professor asks. The student says that maybe they should post police to prevent it from happening. The professor realizes that the student didn't really understand what accreditation is all about. The professor explains to the student that if the school loses its accreditation, nobody comes to shut down the school. There are no legal penalties, no fines, no jail sentences. Classes do not stop. Everything continues just as it was before. The agency won't remove anything *tangible*. The buildings and grounds will look exactly the same. Everything will go on as it always has. All that will be different is that a higher body will have declared that this is no longer holy ground. A higher body will have declared that this is no longer a sacred place for learning. Materially, the school will look exactly the same. But the soul of the university will be gone.

I sometimes wonder, could the same be said of us as believers in Jesus Christ? We have the material trappings of a Christian. We rise and come to church on Sunday morning. Maybe we are active on a church committee, or we teach Sunday school, or we sing in a choir, or we work in a great effort like making Country Carnival happen, or we help build a Habitat House.

Our friends look at us and think we are really involved in religious matters.  
We have a Bible, though we may not read it – though we may read books *about* the Bible.  
Yet I wonder, are our prayers facile, are our meditations shallow, is our quiet time with God  
an infinitesimal sliver of our overall life?  
Does what we do in our religious community really have to do with enhancing our communion with God?  
Does what we do really aid us in cultivating a vibrant sense of relationship with God?  
We have the trappings of a believer.  
But do we really have the accreditation of a true servant of Jesus Christ?

In a few moments we will stream down to the altar and place our pledge cards upon the table.  
We think that in bringing our pledge cards we are paying the light bill and funding the ministers' salaries and  
putting gas in the church van. That is an illusion.  
What we are really doing is expressing the vibrancy of our relationship with God  
as a people redeemed by God's work.  
What we are really doing is collectively expressing our intent to be an instrument of God's kingdom.  
That's where our accreditation as a people of God lies.  
If a transient snuck in here tonight and went to sleep on one of the pews smoking a cigarette  
and burned this beautiful sanctuary to the ground, St. John's Baptist Church would still stand!  
For St. John's Baptist Church is not a building; it is a people who have the collective testimony  
of being redeemed by God and who have offered themselves as an instrument of service.  
Conversely, if we lose the vibrancy of our sense of being a divinely-redeemed people,  
if we lose the willingness to be used of God as a willing servant,  
then the beautiful material surroundings that house us might stand as serene as ever,  
but St. John's Baptist Church will have died.

Not long ago, our music minister Warren Howell asked me what the theme of the sermon would be  
on Pledge Sunday, and I told him it would be, "Our lives are grass."  
He said, with just a tinge of sarcasm, "Well, that's a cheery subject."  
But he's right. In the end, it *is* a cheery subject.  
We are grass, but we are *God's* grass, growing toward God's fellowship.  
In my long ministry I've run across five people who have had what they called "post-death" experiences,  
resuscitated after someone had decided that they were physically gone.  
All five of them told me the exact same thing,  
that they came back to earth with extreme reluctance.  
I've thought about their testimony often.  
I've concluded that their reluctance lay in the fact that they had experienced the real world,  
a life beyond this life, a more real life than what they've always known.  
They realized that this life is not the most real life.  
But our lives here are meant to allow us opportunity to cultivate a relationship  
with the One who gives us life, and draws us toward Himself.  
This life is but a preparation for the more real life to come.  
Our heart gives us intimations of this great truth all the time.  
May we be wise enough to heed it.

Dr. Wm. Richard Kremer  
October 26, 2008  
Second in the Series, The Powers of Being