

Fahrenheit 451

The Rev. Pamela L. Foster
Trinity Church in the City of Boston
Pentecost XVII
September 23, 2007

Do you remember Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*? Published in 1953, but set some time after 1990, it was quickly swept onto student assigned reading lists. I remember reading it in combination with Orwell's *1984* and being taught it is a political novel, an alarm sounding the threat of totalitarian government.

We have a very fine local library in our south coast town. The collection of books on tape there is comprehensive. The collection of books on disk is in the start-up stage. I like to listen to books during my commute. Since the car I drive has a disk player only, I have been listening to books I would probably not check out if the selection were wider. Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* is one. I think you might be as surprised as I am in our post – 1990 world at how close to the mark Bradbury came in imagining the technology that surrounds us now.

Another surprise has been the realization that this book is not at all a warning against totalitarian government. It is about people, people who choose the numbing, lulling and ultimately isolating companionship of broadcast tv and radio over real human encounter with one another. It is about human beings who, gradually over time, have voluntarily ceded their ability to think and to feel in order to achieve "happiness." 451 degrees Fahrenheit is the temperature at which paper burns, as I recall. In this novel, because books provoke conversation and spectrum of opinion, cause people to dream dreams, show them the richness of history and the possibilities of the future, contain the clash of ideas, because books inspire all this and more, they stir the pot too much. Threaten the self chosen, not government imposed, pseudo-serenity of the people, and so the culture has spiraled down to the point where books are banned. To the point where by common consent there has been a government decree that when discovered they are burned – that is the job of firemen in the culture, to burn not to put out fires – books are burned and their owners are either killed or imprisoned.

In a May, 2007, interview with a *Los Angeles Times* reporter, Bradbury, sitting in a room in his home that contained a very large flat-screen TV, reiterated his concern that real human interaction is at risk due to some of the mindless ways in which we embrace and depend on technology. It's not technology itself that is the threat. It's human narrowness of mind and spirit that lazily substitutes just about anything for meaningful relationship meaningful exchange, mutual regard. In *Fahrenheit 451* with the exception of a character named Clarissa, who is very young, everyone is infected. One man, however, begins to rediscover his integrity. Holy Scripture plays a role in that, if you recall.

+++

Let's jump now to the Gospel reading we have heard this morning. It is meant to shock and disturb us, to confuse us – let's get that out on the table right away. It is meant to confront the crowd that follows Jesus, the disciples – his inner circle, the establishment – here characterized as “lovers of money” and us with “acting shrewdly,” to quote the text. It is one of two shocking stories in this chapter of Luke that baldly ask, “How do you think of and manage your money?” That was a very touchy subject when Jesus addressed it, when Luke wrote down the stories Jesus told about it, and it continues to be ... in spades, in our time. Many people believe we should not talk about money in church, it's such a touchy subject. It would be difficult to talk about Jesus with integrity, or the community formed in his name, without talking about money. It was and is that important. Very touchy subject.

+++

The rich man who employed the manager was probably an absentee landlord. In Jesus' day, the people who worked the land, were rarely owners of the land and were often exploited by landlords. The right to use the land for their livelihood depended upon payment of a share of the produce of the land to the owner. The manager would have been the on-sight agent who negotiated contracts, collected the agreed upon shares and recorded all these transactions. In the story reports have reached the landowner that the manager is either incompetent or dishonest. He is squandering. The landowner fires him. The manager devises a clever or shrewd scheme that results in relief for the tenants, and puts him in relationship with them in a new and better way. The burden of their share is reduced from what it would normally be. Evidently the landlord receives his share. Perhaps the manager reduced his own commission – that's not clear in the story. What is clear is the landlord, despite having fired him, admires how shrewdly or pragmatically the manager has acted in these financial transactions. The sense is, “Why that clever rascal!”

What Jesus appears to say, then, as the passage concludes, is that clever rascals are frequently more shrewd, more thoughtful, more pragmatic in their specialty, their field, than are people who profess to love and follow God. Moreover, shrewdness with respect to money for those who love and follow God, means that money is used to fund relationship with God and relief for those in need. That is the true meaning of “shrewd” in Jesus' eyes. The manager may have backed into using “dishonest wealth” in a faithful way, but he got himself there. Let's hope he can keep on growing.

The point that I made with respect to the characters who live in the pages of *Fahrenheit 451* holds true for the people we meet in the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, no one, with the exception of Jesus, comes clean and pure into the story. How very true to life that is outside the pages of books. Everyone is a jumble of mixed motives, failures to seize on the beautiful possibilities of life, flight from the changes and chances of living and from one another into dulling, dimming illusions of security and predictability. Protecting our wealth and possessions above all else is part of that flight. At the same time, Jesus teaches, we do have the capacity to reach down and find our better selves with God's help, even if, like the manager, we back into our finding. To

strike out toward the heavenly vision that is contained within the pages of the books that make up Holy Scripture is to live. Of course, people who do this have to engage with one another over what these books contain. Discipline ourselves to reflect and pray over what is there. Take seriously what is said there about the uses of wealth and the true nature of community and the mandate to care for one another. We have to end the bans we place on these books through ignoring them.

The passage we read this morning is not about burning books, rather it is about burning bridges. We can burn the bridges that lead us back to repetitive, time-worn, exploitive and “squandering” ways of living in God’s world. We can turn in a new direction to move across the bridges that lead in hope to real life, eternal life, life lived for God and neighbor. Or we can continue in the way we now go - trying to burn the bridges of hope. The fires ignited in trying to do that only burn our integrity, but folks often choose those fires, especially in relation to money, possessions. That way lies numbing, lulling, dulling, false security. The next story Jesus tells in this chapter follows on from this one and is all about making the numbing, lulling, dulling run at false security. The one we have before us today calls us across the bridges of hope.

Amen.