

## FINDING GURGANUS' "BLESSED ASSURANCE" IN *WHITE PEOPLE*

A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan  
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Jacob tricks Esau out of his birthright as you heard in the reading from Genesis.<sup>i</sup> Jacob becomes a great patriarch of Israel. Esau doesn't. The Bible speaks of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,<sup>ii</sup> not of Abraham, Isaac and Esau. How does Jacob get away with this? He doesn't seem to feel guilty, and there's no adverse reaction from God. In Jesus' familiar parable of the sower, he distinguishes between seeds that fall on a well-trodden path, on rocky ground, among thorns, and on good soil. The only ones that survive and flourish, of course, are those falling on good soil. Jesus, in explaining this parable, analogizes the kinds of soil to kinds of people hearing the word of the kingdom of God and either not understanding it, or abandoning it in the face of trouble or persecution, or becoming blinded to it by the lure of wealth, or truly understanding it so that it bears fruit. Jacob sounds like one for whom the word of God is choked off by the lure of wealth. Yet, instead he becomes God's patriarch, is renamed Israel<sup>iii</sup>, does indeed gain many possessions,<sup>iv</sup> and becomes the progenitor of the twelve tribes of Israel.

What's the dynamic going on here? A number of commentators historically have pointed to Jacob's story as one demonstrating God's sovereignty above all human institutions like inheritance laws.<sup>v</sup> God's will is inscrutable to mere mortals. It's also not Abraham's first born, Ishmael, who becomes a patriarch, but Isaac, who then becomes the father of Jacob. Of Jacob's twelve sons, it is the eleventh, Joseph, who ends up ruling over his brothers after they come to Egypt to escape famine in Canaan.<sup>vi</sup> Maybe there's also something here of God's graciousness, even to sinners. There's an old Christian hymn that begins, "Blessed Assurance, Jesus is mine! O, what a foretaste of glory divine!"<sup>vii</sup> Salvation is within the reach of sinners just as surely as the reach of the righteous, through the infinite love of God, as manifested for Christians in Jesus.

I think this dynamic is played out beautifully on an accessible, human level in a short story named "Blessed Assurance" by contemporary author Allan Gurganus, who was once a Wallace Stegner fellow here at Stanford, and stayed on to teach for a while afterwards. The story is found in a book called White People, which in 1991 won both the Los Angeles Times Book Prize for Fiction and the Southern Book Award for Fiction. "Blessed Assurance" is set in North Carolina, where Gurganus was born in 1947.

The main character, Jerry, at the age of 19 is selling funeral insurance during the 1940's in a low-income, African American neighborhood. He comes from a poor white family himself, where his father is dying of brown lung disease from working in the local cotton mill. Jerry's trying to earn money to put himself through college at night. The insurance he sells will pay for funeral expenses of the beneficiary, including the gravestone, coffin, hearse, flowers, and other funeral home expenses. It will pay for certain additional things, like transportation costs of loved ones to attend the funeral. Virtually all of his clients are elderly black women, some of whom have already paid thousands and thousands of dollars over a very long time to maintain their insurance – a

lot of money for anyone in the 1940's, much less people working for very low wages or living off meager retirement benefits. But the catch with this insurance is that if you miss just two weekly payments in a row, your policy becomes null and void and you forfeit all insurance benefits. In effect, this means you lose everything you've paid in over many years, even if it would have purchased a lot more funeral than you'd ever reasonably have. Jerry's job is to try to find new business, but more importantly to collect door-to-door the fifty cents or so owed weekly by each insurance holder, and then to cut them off forever if they miss two weeks.

Jerry's boss tells him that the key to success is not to get to know people personally and never to begin fronting any weekly payments from your own pocket in order to avoid cutting them off after two weeks of delinquency. Before long, though, Jerry has violated both rules. He's gotten to know one of his clients very well -- ninety-some year old Vesta Lotte Battle -- and he's fronting payments for her and eight other clients who have fallen two weeks or more behind on their payments. Jerry can't really afford it, financially or emotionally, and his boss is able to sniff him out:

"Something's wrong," Sam said. "Black circles creeping under your eyes... You are keeping the old heart well out of this, right, Jer?" ...I'd been so silent for so long. Nine old people felt they owed me their lives... [But] I was, after all, legally responsible to Sam here, and if a person's boss actually *orders* that person to hand over an inventory of backsliding wrongdoers, well... What can I say? I was nineteen years old. I'd been buying my own clothes since I was eleven. Other guys my age and half as smart, a tenth as driven, were already off at college, lounging around, sleeping in till 11:30 a.m. [Sam continues:] "Buddy? Something's off, right? College material like you, and with bags down to here... Know what Sam here's starting to think? Somebody's holding out on you. You definitely got moochers. More'n one, too. Your face gives it away... You're shielding them, but who's looking out for you? ...*I'm* here for you... Pass your uncle the names. I'll need the exact dollar amount each leech has sucked out of my favorite. Jerry? Tell your Uncle Sam."

[As Jerry then explains] "Tears stood in my boss's eyes. That's when I knew I had to let him save me. Yellow is such a beautiful positive color, isn't it? ...I slept so well that night! Why lie about it?"<sup>viii</sup>

So nine of Jerry's clients have now lost their funeral insurance and every penny they've ever paid in. Vesta had paid over \$4,300 during more than thirty years. She owed \$12.50. She had to stop paying when her daughter, who'd been sending her regular support checks for a number of years, was no longer able to do so. Jerry began avoiding her block, where most of the other clients he'd cut off also lived, collecting from paying clients there only at night. But then he ran into Vesta when he couldn't help but go to her daughter's funeral. As she was surrounded by ten neighborhood kids whose hands clenched into fists, here's what Vesta said to Jerry:

You did come. I done told them. And we thanks you... Look, not to worry about all that other, hear? We doing just fine. Fact is, been missing you more than we miss it... Don't go fretting none, child, you tried. You gone to be fine. I'm gone be fine."<sup>ix</sup>

So there we have it. Blessed Assurance to Jerry the sinner from the mouth of the person he has most sinned against. How can it be? 40 years later, as Jerry looks back on his college years from the vantage point of the 1980's, he admits that he still feels bad

about what went on with his insurance business at 19. Telling his story about Vesta becomes a confessional exercise – “Worry over this takes a percentage of my sleep right off the top – So I’m telling you, okay?”<sup>x</sup> Maybe he simply hasn’t gotten the point of the kind of unconditional love that Jesus offers the repenting sinner.

Let me tell you a little more of the story. Two weeks after her daughter’s funeral, Vesta herself dies. At Vesta’s funeral, Jerry finds himself standing up to say how badly he feels about selling funeral insurance. Sure, he “wanted a college education, but not one built by walking on the heads of others.” An old man up front cries back at him “Jesus Have His Ways, Child. Be of Comfort, Son. You going to act right. You wait. Scales going to fall off them young eyes by-and-by. You’ll see.”<sup>xi</sup> At that, Jerry walks forward to the collection plate and dumps his premium book into it, along with all the cash he had, about \$90. Then he drops in the keys to his loyal used car, a Nash, and tells the congregation where it’s parked. He announces that he wants a college scholarship fund set up for a deserving child from the church, and then he leaves.

Two days later he receives a package in the mail with all the cash, his premium book and the car keys. A note reads,

“We all get move sometime. Sometime we needs to think out why. If it still the same way you felt, then we start up the college thing for one of our young folk. If not, then that OK too. Cause we all children of God. Either way you a man of heart. In Christ Blood Bartered for us sinners, I am Rev. T.Y. Matthews – Free-Will Afro-Baptist (Church).”<sup>xii</sup>

So what does Jerry do? He explains: “Look, I kept the car. Can you forgive me? I waited till night to go collect it. I hated being seen.” He also sits down and writes a check for two hundred dollars to the church: “Signing it, my hands shook – the largest check I’d ever written.”

Gerry quits the funeral insurance business, and working at other odd jobs manages both to pay for his undergraduate degree and also to save for law school. He ends up making law review at Duke and has a successful career in law and business that leads to a beach house and trust funds for his children. As he describes it when he’s 59 years old, “Over my years I’ve been ethical usually, and (to be fair to myself) sometimes even when it hurt... Over thirty-odd years, I’ve told myself to forget the insurance route. And yet, lately for no good reason, it’s been coming back on me, like an overrich meal. We all have our crimes, right?...I still feel responsible for those nine who never got the warm reception...I mean, basically I’m not all that bad of a man, am I. Am I?”

Is he? On what kind of soil has the seed been sown in Jerry? In the words of Jesus, has the seed been choked by the weeds of the cares of the world and the lure of wealth? Or is Jerry good soil – one who hears the word and understands it, and then bears fruit?

It seems to me that there are three steps described in this story: First, try to lead an ethical life. As the old hymn puts it: “Once to every soul and nation comes the moment to decide...Then it is the brave one chooses, while the coward stands aside.”<sup>xiii</sup> Jerry had his moments of bravery, but he also had his moments of cowardice, like most of us. So, second, recognize your ethical shortcomings, confess and repent of them, and atone for them. Here, Jerry seems to have succeeded: His whole story is a confession of shortcomings for which he’s repenting. From quitting his insurance work, to his \$200

contribution to the church, to the way he's tried to conduct himself ever since, Jerry is trying to atone. Third, there's blessed assurance. That comes on a human level from Vesta: "Don't go fretting none, child, you tried. You gone to be fine. I'm gone be fine." It comes from the Rev. T.Y. Matthews: "We all children of God. Either way you a man of heart."

And on a spiritual level, as the hymn "Blessed Assurance" puts it, "Echoes of mercy, whispers of love" are promised when "I in my Savior am happy and blest."<sup>xiv</sup> That is, the central message of Christianity remains that God is love and that Jesus has demonstrated that heavenly love on earth. God, being gracious and loving, will have mercy on us as we confess our shortcomings and try to walk God's ways, following in the footsteps of Jesus. In the words of our opening hymn, "Surely God's goodness and mercy here daily attend you. Ponder anew what the Almighty can do, who with great love does befriend you."<sup>xv</sup> In the words of the closing hymn, "A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing; our helper sure amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing."

So, it's all about trying to lead an ethical life, confessing our sinful shortcomings, and receiving the blessed assurance of God's everlasting love. Coming full cycle, then, gratitude for that love sends us back again to try to lead a fully ethical life, beginning the threefold process again. Jacob ultimately gives Esau an enormous gift of camels, cattle, goats and donkeys,<sup>xvi</sup> saying "Please accept my gift that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me."<sup>xvii</sup> Jerry takes his boss's advice: "You want to be all things to all people, but you can't. Choose maybe four, six, tops... You get to pick this one handful, then you really better stick your neck out."<sup>xviii</sup> Let's see what we can do.

## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> Genesis 25: 29-34.

<sup>ii</sup> See for example, Exodus 3:6, 3:15, 4:5; Mark 12:26; Luke 20:37; Acts 3:13, 7:32.

<sup>iii</sup> Genesis 32: 28.

<sup>iv</sup> Genesis 47:27.

<sup>v</sup> See, for example, *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), p. 26 and *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (Oxford, England: University Press, 2001), p. 55.

<sup>vi</sup> *Oxford Bible Commentary*, p. 55.

<sup>vii</sup> As cited in Allan Gurganus, “Blessed Assurance” in *White People* (New York: Ivy Books, 1990), p. 286.

<sup>viii</sup> Gurganus, *White People*, pp. 274-275.

<sup>ix</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 278.

<sup>x</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 232.

<sup>xi</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 293.

<sup>xii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 296.

<sup>xiii</sup> James Russell Lowell, “Once to Every Soul and Nation,” in *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), #119.

<sup>xiv</sup> Phoebe Knapp and Franny Cosby, “Blessed Assurance” in *Hymn Stories* at [www.gospelpiano.com/articles/hymn-stories-19-blessed-assurance.htm](http://www.gospelpiano.com/articles/hymn-stories-19-blessed-assurance.htm)

<sup>xv</sup> Joachim Neander (translation based on Catherine Winkworth), “Praise Be to God, the Almighty” in *Singing the Living Tradition*, #278.

<sup>xvi</sup> Genesis 32: 13-15.

<sup>xvii</sup> Genesis 33:11.

<sup>xviii</sup> Gurganus, “Blessed Assurance,” p. 304.