

Matthew 6:25-34
June 26, '11
VBS

“THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO CHARLOTTE’S WEB”
INTRODUCTION

MANY OF YOU ARE VERY FAMILIAR WITH E.B. WHITE’S CLASSIC CHILDREN’S NOVEL, CHARLOTTE’S WEB. YOU MAY REMEMBER READING IT AS A CHILD OR EVEN READING IT *TO* YOUR CHILDREN. YOU MAY REMEMBER THE HANNA-BARBERA ANIMATED VERSION FROM 1973 OR THE LIVE ACTION FILM IN 2006.

THE BOOK WAS PUBLISHED IN 1952 – A GOOD YEAR FOR CHILDREN’S BOOKS BECAUSE C.S. LEWIS’S THE VOYAGE OF THE DAWN TREADER, THE THIRD BOOK IN THE CHRONICLES OF NARNIA SERIES WAS PUBLISHED THAT YEAR AS WELL.

CHARLOTTE’S WEB HAS BEEN ENORMOUSLY POPULAR FOR NEARLY 60 YEARS & IS THE LARGEST-SELLING CHILDREN’S PAPERBACK OF ALL TIME.

IT’S INTERESTING THAT E.B. WHITE WROTE AN ARTICLE FOR THE “ATLANTIC MONTHLY” IN 1948 WHICH BEGINS LIKE THIS:

I SPENT SEVERAL DAYS AND NIGHTS IN MID-SEPTEMBER WITH AN AILING PIG AND I FEEL DRIVEN TO ACCOUNT FOR THIS STRETCH OF TIME, MORE PARTICULARLY SINCE THE PIG DIED AT LAST, AND I LIVED, AND THINGS MIGHT EASILY HAVE GONE THE OTHER WAY ROUND AND NONE LEFT TO DO THE ACCOUNTING.”

IT HAS BEEN SUGGESTED – QUITE LOGICALLY - THAT CHARLOTTE’S WEB WAS BASED ON THAT EXPERIENCE OF E.B. WHITE.

EVERY YEAR AT EASTMINSTER ON VACATION BIBLE SCHOOL SUNDAY, WE REVERSE THE ORDER OF THE SERMON AND THE CHILDREN’S SERMON - AND THE LENGTH OF THEM AS WELL, WITH THE SERMON BEING THE SHORTER OF THE TWO.

IF YOU’RE LIKE ME, YOU REMEMBER HOW TORTUROUSLY BORING IT WAS, AS A CHILD, TO SIT THROUGH AN ENTIRE WORSHIP SERVICE & SO IT ONLY SEEMS FAIR THAT AT LEAST ONCE A YEAR THE CHILDREN FEEL AS THOUGH THE WORDS FROM THE PULPIT ARE BEING DIRECTLY ADDRESSED TO THEM.

I URGE YOU, THOUGH, NOT TO CONCLUDE THAT THE CHILDREN’S SERMON THIS MORNING IS *JUST* FOR CHILDREN.

YOU JUST MAY FIND THAT IT HAS MORE MEANING FOR YOU THAN MOST OF THE REGULAR SERMONS YOU HEAR FROM THIS PULPIT!

Matthew 6:25-34

June 26, '11
Vacation Bible School

“THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO CHARLOTTE’S WEB”

“WHERE’S PAPA GOING WITH THAT AX?”

THAT’S ONE OF THE GREATEST OPENING LINES IN ANY BOOK AND, VERY STRANGELY, IT’S THE OPENING LINE OF A STORY ABOUT LOVE & FRIENDSHIP.

IT WAS LITTLE 8-YEAR-OLD FERN WHO ASKED THE QUESTION AS HER PAPA WAS GOING OUT TO THE BARN TO KILL A NEW-BORN PIG BECAUSE HE WAS A “RUNT.”

THAT MEANT HE WAS TOO SMALL TO LIVE.

FERN WAS BESIDE HERSELF WITH ANGER & SADNESS AND SO HER FATHER TOLD HER THAT SHE COULD RAISE THE PIG HERSELF.

AND SHE DID.

SHE EVEN NAMED HIM – WITH THE MOST BEAUTIFUL NAME SHE COULD THINK OF – WILBUR.

NOW THAT MAY NOT SEEM LIKE A VERY BEAUTIFUL NAME TO US, BUT IT WAS TO FERN.

EVERY DAY, FERN TOOK CARE OF WILBUR, AND HE GREW OUT OF HIS “RUNTINESS” UNTIL ONE DAY, FERN’S PAPA TOLD HER THAT SHE WOULD HAVE TO SELL HIM LIKE THEY DID ALL THE PIGS.

SHE SOLD HIM TO HER UNCLE – HOMER ZUCKERMAN – WHO LIVED RIGHT NEXT DOOR.

THAT MEANT THAT FERN COULD STILL VISIT WILBUR – AND SHE DID – EVERY DAY.

SHE COULDN’T ALWAYS BE THERE, THOUGH, AND WILBUR BECAME VERY, VERY LONELY.

AND NOW WE COME TO A VERY IMPORTANT PART OF THE BOOK & IT’S NEAR THE VERY BEGINNING.

LISTEN TO THIS –

“THIS WAS THE WORST DAY OF HIS LIFE. HE DIDN’T KNOW WHETHER HE COULD ENDURE THE AWFUL LONELINESS ANYMORE.

DARKNESS SETTLED OVER EVERYTHING.”

NOW WE CAN STOP RIGHT THERE BECAUSE THAT’S A VERY IMPORTANT LINE – *“DARKNESS SETTLED OVER EVERYTHING.”*

WHEN WE THINK OF “DARKNESS SETTLING OVER EVERYTHING,” WE THINK THAT IT MUST BE NIGHTTIME. AND IT WAS.

BUT THERE WAS ALSO A DIFFERENT KIND OF DARKNESS FOR WILBUR.

IT WAS THE DARKNESS OF HIS LONELINESS.

LONELINESS CAN BE A VERY DARK TIME OF LIFE FOR ANYONE.

LET’S GO BACK, THOUGH, TO THAT SAME PART OF THE BOOK.

“DARKNESS SETTLED OVER EVERYTHING....YOU CAN IMAGINE WILBUR’S SURPRISE WHEN OUT OF THE DARKNESS CAME A VOICE THAT SAID, ‘DO YOU WANT A FRIEND WILBUR? I’LL BE A FRIEND TO YOU. I’VE WATCHED YOU ALL DAY & I LIKE YOU.’”

WOW! REMEMBER – THIS IS THE WORST DAY OF WILBUR’S LIFE.

AND HERE IS SOMEONE WHO HAS BEEN WATCHING HIM IN HIS LONELINESS & WANTS TO BE HIS FRIEND.
WILBUR DOESN'T FIND OUT WHO IT IS UNTIL THE NEXT DAY BECAUSE HE CAN ONLY HEAR THE VOICE.
BUT WE KNOW THAT IT'S CHARLOTTE – A KINDLY SPIDER WHO CARED ABOUT WILBUR WHEN HE WAS
LONELY.

THAT'S SOMETHING WE CAN ALL DO FOR SOMEONE ELSE.

WHEN WE SEE SOMEONE WHO'S HAVING A HARD DAY OR SEE SOMEONE WHO'S LONELY, WE CAN BE
THERE & SAY *"I WANT TO BE YOUR FRIEND."*

WELL, IT ISN'T LONG BEFORE THE STORY TAKES ANOTHER FRIGHTENING TURN JUST LIKE AT THE VERY
BEGINNING BECAUSE, ONCE AGAIN, SOMEONE TELLS WILBUR THAT HE'S GOING TO BE KILLED.

IN THE MOVIE THAT YOU SAW, IT'S TEMPLETON THE RAT (AND WE'LL TALK MORE ABOUT HIM LATER)
WHO SAYS, *"COME WINTER, THE FARMER WILL BE CHECKING YOU INTO THE OLD SMOKEHOUSE HOTEL. AND THE
ONLY CHECKING OUT THAT HAPPENS IS WHEN PEOPLE GATHER 'ROUND AND SAY, 'CHECK OUT THAT YUMMY SAUSAGE.
CHECK OUT THAT SIZZLING BACON.'"*

WELL, WILBUR, OF COURSE, IS TERRIFIED & SAYS HE DOESN'T WANT TO DIE.

IT'S CHARLOTTE ONCE AGAIN WHO COMFORTS WILBUR BY SAYING SHE WON'T LET HIM DIE.

WHEN WILBUR ASKS HOW SHE'S GOING TO DO IT, SHE SAYS SHE DOESN'T KNOW!

NOW, CAN YOU IMAGINE THAT?!

SHE DOESN'T HAVE A CLUE AS TO HOW SHE'S GOING TO SAVE WILBUR, BUT SHE KNOWS SHE HAS TO
THINK OF A WAY BECAUSE SHE'S HIS FRIEND.

WHAT A WONDERFUL FRIEND TO HAVE!

AND IT WOULD BE GOOD IF YOU COULD BE A FRIEND LIKE THAT TO SOMEONE ELSE.

WHEN A FRIEND HAS A PROBLEM, DO WHATEVER YOU CAN TO HELP THEM SOLVE IT.

WILBUR IS STILL VERY UPSET ABOUT ALL THIS TALK OF DYING & CHARLOTTE SAYS SOMETHING TO HIM
THAT'S VERY MUCH LIKE THE WORDS OF JESUS WE READ THIS MORNING FROM THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT &
VERY MUCH LIKE A LESSON THAT ANNIE LEARNED IN OUR SKITS THIS WEEK.

CHARLOTTE SAYS TO WILBUR – *"NEVER HURRY & NEVER WORRY."*

WHAT SHE'S TELLING HIM IS THAT THERE'S SOMEONE ABOVE HIM (THAT'S HER AT THE TOP OF THE
BARN DOOR) WHO WILL ALWAYS WATCH OVER HIM & TAKE CARE OF HIM & HE SIMPLY NEEDS TO BE PATIENT &
NOT FILL HIMSELF WITH WORRY.

THERE'S SOMEONE ABOVE YOU WHO WILL ALWAYS WATCH OVER YOU & TAKE CARE OF YOU AS WELL.

WELL, OF COURSE, CHARLOTTE *DOES* THINK OF A WAY TO SAVE WILBUR.

SHE WRITES WORDS IN HER WEB AT THE ENTRANCE TO THE BARN.

FIRST, SHE WRITES *"SOME PIG,"* THEN *"TERRIFIC,"* AND, FINALLY, *"RADIANT."*

EACH TIME THOSE WORDS ARE SEEN, PEOPLE COME FLOCKING TO THE ZUCKERMAN FARM TO SEE WHAT
THEY BELIEVE IS A MIRACLE.

WITH THE APPEARANCE OF THE FIRST WORDS, HOMER WENT TO THE MINISTER WHO THEN PREACHED ABOUT IT IN HIS SERMON ON SUNDAY.

“HE SAID THE WORDS ON THE SPIDER’S WEB PROVED THAT HUMAN BEINGS MUST ALWAYS BE ON THE WATCH FOR THE COMING OF WONDERS.”

“BE ON THE WATCH FOR THE COMING OF WONDERS.”

WHAT HE WAS SAYING WAS THAT GOD IS ALWAYS AT WORK IN THE WORLD & THERE ARE WONDERFUL EXAMPLES OF GOD’S WORK ALL AROUND US EVERY DAY.

THE DOCTOR SAYS PRETTY MUCH THE SAME THING.

WHEN FERN’S MOTHER GOES TO SEE HIM ABOUT ALL THAT’S HAPPENED, HE SAYS, *“WHEN THE WORDS APPEARED, EVERYONE SAID THEY WERE A MIRACLE. BUT NOBODY POINTED OUT THAT THE WEB ITSELF IS A MIRACLE.”*

THERE ARE WONDERS AROUND US EVERY DAY.

WELL, BACK TO THE STORY NOW, BECAUSE MR. ZUCKERMAN HAS DECIDED TO ENTER WILBUR IN THE COUNTY FAIR.

THAT’S WHAT ALL OF OUR CHARACTERS AT VACATION BIBLE SCHOOL WERE LOOKING FORWARD TO THIS WEEK.

EVERYONE IS EXCITED – NOT ONLY THAT WILBUR WILL BE GOING TO THE FAIR, BUT THAT IT MEANS HIS LIFE WILL PROBABLY BE SPARED.

WHEN WILBUR ASKS CHARLOTTE IF SHE’S GOING TO GO, SHE TELLS HIM THAT SHE WON’T BE ABLE TO BECAUSE SHE’S TIRED & YOU KNOW THAT SOMETHING IS WRONG.

SHE REALIZES, THOUGH, THAT WILBUR WILL BE TERRIBLY FRIGHTENED WITHOUT HER & SO SHE FINALLY AGREES TO HIDE IN HIS CRATE & JOIN HIM – AS DOES TEMPLETON THE RAT (AND WE’LL SAY MORE ABOUT HIM IN JUST A MINUTE.)

WHEN THEY GET TO THE FAIR, CHARLOTTE ASKS TEMPLETON TO GO OUT & FIND HER A WORD.

SHE GOT “TERRIFIC” & “RADIANT” FROM SCRAPS OF PAPER TEMPLETON HAD BROUGHT HER ON HIS MANY GARBAGE SCAVENGINGS.

SHE SAYS, *“I SHALL BE WRITING TONIGHT FOR THE LAST TIME”* AND NOW WE KNOW, FOR SURE, THAT SOMETHING IS WRONG WITH CHARLOTTE.

WELL, TEMPLETON FINDS A LAST WORD FOR HER & MAYBE NOW IT’S FINALLY TIME TO TALK ABOUT TEMPLETON.

IN THE BOOK, UNLIKE THE MOVIE, THERE ARE ONLY 3 CREATURES WHO ARE GIVEN NAMES – THERE’S CHARLOTTE, WILBUR & TEMPLETON.

CHARLOTTE SHOWS US THE VERY BEST OF SOMEONE.

SHE HAS THE FRUITS OF THE SPIRIT – LOVE, JOY, PEACE, PATIENCE, KINDNESS, GOODNESS, SELF-CONTROL, FAITHFULNESS & GENTLENESS.

SHE IS A GIVING CREATURE.

TEMPLETON, ON THE OTHER HAND, ALWAYS ASKS “*WHAT’S IN IT FOR ME?*”

CHARLOTTE IS A GIVER & TEMPLETON IS A TAKER.

OH, HE DOES THINGS – BUT ONLY WHEN IT’S SOMETHING THAT WILL HELP HIM.

IF YOU WANT TO BE SOMEONE WHO FOLLOWS JESUS, YOU’LL TRY TO BE MORE LIKE CHARLOTTE THAN TEMPLETON.

DON’T ASK “*WHAT’S IN IT FOR ME?*” BUT ASK, “*HOW CAN I HELP SOMEONE ELSE?*”

WELL, BACK TO THE STORY.

CHARLOTTE HAS ONE LAST WORD TO WRITE IN HER WEB.

WHAT WOULD THAT LAST WORD BE?

WELL, YOU’D THINK IT WOULD BE SOMETHING REALLY BIG & BOISTEROUS.

BUT CHARLOTTE’S FINAL WORD WASN’T “BRILLIANT” OR “BEAUTIFUL.”

IT WASN’T “SUPERB” OR “STUPENDOUS.”

NO, CHARLOTTE’S FINAL WORD IN HER WEB FOR WILBUR WAS “HUMBLE.”

“HUMBLE” MEANS NOT DRAWING ATTENTION TO YOURSELF.

IT MEANS NOT BEING STUCK UP.

IT MEANS NOT THINKING YOU’RE BETTER THAN ANYONE ELSE.

IT MEANS NOT TELLING EVERYONE HOW GOOD YOU ARE.

WILBUR DOESN’T WIN FIRST PRIZE AT THE COUNTY FAIR, BUT WHEN EVERYONE SEES THIS FINAL WORD, THERE’S AN ANNOUNCEMENT MADE THAT THERE WILL BE A SPECIAL AWARD GIVEN TO WILBUR BY THE JUDGES.

HE GETS A SPECIAL BLUE RIBBON & EVERYONE CHEERS WILDLY FOR HIM.

AFTER WRITING HER FINAL WORD, CHARLOTTE LAID A SACK OF EGGS NEAR HER WEB – A SACK THAT CONTAINED 514 SPIDERS WHO WILL BE BORN THE NEXT SPRING.

WHEN SHE TELLS WILBUR THAT SHE WON’T BE GOING BACK TO THE FARM, HE FRANTICALLY MAKES SURE THAT HER EGGS *DO* MAKE IT BACK – 514 SPIDERS READY TO ENTER THE WORLD.

CHARLOTTE DIES – BUT SHE DIES VERY HAPPY, KNOWING THAT SHE HAS SAVED WILBUR & THAT HER LITTLE BABY SPIDERS WILL BE SAFE ON THE FARM.

THE NEXT SPRING, WHEN THEY’RE BORN, ALL BUT 3 OF THOSE SPIDERS LEAVE THE FARM & HEAD OFF ON THEIR OWN TO FIND NEW HOMES.

BUT THREE REMAIN BEHIND & BECOME WILBUR’S VERY BEST FRIENDS – JUST LIKE THEIR MOTHER WAS.

AND, YOU KNOW, WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT THAT FINAL WORD CHARLOTTE WROTE – “HUMBLE” – WASN’T IT REALLY A WORD THAT DESCRIBED CHARLOTTE EVEN MORE THAN WILBUR.

SHE NEVER DREW ATTENTION TO HERSELF BUT ALWAYS THOUGHT OF HOW SHE COULD HELP SOMEONE ELSE.

THE STORY ENDS – AS IT BEGAN – WITH WONDERFUL WORDS: “*IT IS NOT OFTEN THAT SOMEONE COMES
ALONG WHO IS A TRUE FRIEND & A GOOD WRITER – CHARLOTTE WAS BOTH.*” AMEN.

*The Reverend Dr. Dennis R. Davenport
Eastminster Presbyterian Church
Evansville, Indiana*