

Sermon: Year C, Proper 21

Texts: Amos 6:1-7

I Timothy 6:11-19

Luke 16:19-31

The story Jesus told of Lazarus and the rich man was meant to capture us, and to this end, it has proved terribly effective – in its own time and in ours too. For it is perfectly drawn.

Who could be a more sympathetic character than Lazarus? His extreme poverty is matched only by his innocence. He lies outside the gates of the civilized, a pure outcast. No one acknowledges him. This is left to the dogs alone, who lick his sores. Such pity is all the more moving when it has no human source but comes from below, from poorer animals who cannot use their tongues to speak or cry out or protest. Lazarus asks for almost nothing; he never makes himself a nuisance, imposing himself. He exists, passively, with the futile hope that just a few of the crumbs from the tables inside will fall his way. Which they don't.

In contrast, within the walls of the compound, the idyll master enjoys his lot. There is no better villain. His meals are sumptuous. Vain, selfish, the very prince of self-esteem, he lives in decided ignorance of the troubles of others. A gated community is his privilege. His own pleasure is his right.

And thus the trap is set. For who can hear of these two without reacting for and against. Who of us do not know exactly the same divide? We can associate with Lazarus and burn with resentment and accusation against the wealthy who never seem to be suitably disturbed by the plight of those who suffer. And just as easily, we can feel the hot breath of condemnation on our own necks, for in the world's terms *we* are the wealthy, secluded within our own ever-inflated desires for more. Yes, the world's problems can be contemplated, but only in so far as they don't disturb our own plans for advancement, and often, what we give in comparison with what we want is, at best, mere crumbs.

And here God's role comes into play. For it is God who ultimately intervenes and establishes true justice. The innocent poor, we are informed, will be rewarded by the measure of eternity, lifted by the angels themselves into heaven. And the despicable rich will be cast into the unending and inescapable hell of unrelieved anguish. This, the story insists, is what we can rely on: each and all will receive their just deserts. There's something so intensely satisfying about this promised arrangement. Everything will be set right, by the unquestionable verdict of God.

It's hard justice, made all the more objective and clean by the continuation of Jesus' story. Horrified by his own lot, the rich man pleads with Abraham himself that somehow, somehow, some mercy might be shown, so that the man's brothers, still partying in blissful indifference, might be adequately warned. But this would be unfair, and, as Abraham notes, it would also be to no avail. For, as we often suspect, and as he confirms, the insularity of the rich is simply impermeable – no matter what message is sent, no matter by whom. God's judgment is thereby preserved. Thank God. Thank God no one is allowed special favor. Our satisfaction won't be diminished, then, by exceptions, by the rude surprise of God's favoritism toward one or another.

This is the story that captures us. It's the story we usually hear, even though it's not the story Jesus told. For what we often miss in our eagerness is the effect of the one, last and concluding line. By means of it, Jesus actually undoes all that the story had built up. The very point we so assuredly trust is the very trust Jesus wanted to dispel. There is no warning, he solemnly said, that is sufficient to the task. Nothing will shake us with guaranteed results. Moses and the law had proved completely ineffective. All the long line of prophets

failed utterly. And, even if someone were to rise from the dead and offer vivid reports, still, Jesus said, this would accomplish nothing – nothing, that is, with regard to saving those destined for punishment. It would be of no use.

One way of understanding this line would be to become completely fatalistic. What will be... will be. The division of good and evil is hardened to such a degree that even God is compelled to uphold its wound forever. Someone must pay, even while others enjoy redemption. The rich man can't cross the chasm between grace and retribution. Nor can Lazarus. Nor can Abraham. Nor can God himself, in any form. This singular gap is unbridgeable, more eternal than God's own will. God, therefore, serves it. At best and at most, God judges. He is the final arbiter who we must all face, with fear and trembling. -- This should sound all too familiar.

But there is an alternative reading. It begins by our conceding that the last line of the story is actually false in a most dramatic sense. It may indeed be the case that someone risen from the dead would do no better awakening justice than did the prophets or Moses. It may be the case that the chasm we have set between us is, indeed, not crossable by any strength of our own will. But the claim of Jesus is that, in him, God has, in fact, and conclusively erased the deepest divide we suffer. Jesus' death and resurrection do not serve merely as the most compelling testimony by which we should decide, then, to adjust our ways and become better people. Even this does not necessarily change us. But what was accomplished by God was far greater than this. It was the very elimination of the division of good and evil itself. Hear well, then: there is no reward with God. There is no condemnation either. For God is the repairer of even this very breach. God has chosen to be God in precisely this freedom. Our own fatalism has been met by God's determined redemption of all things. And thus, the whole, vast shadow imposed by the threat of hell has been eliminated – along with the equally destructive pride of heaven. Lazarus and the rich man represent the bigotry that resides most deeply within us, which seems to us absolutely insurmountable. But God has overcome even this division. Faith means trusting this, even when it is outrageous, even when it seems most offensive.

In this light, Paul exhorted us to “take hold of the life that really is life.” That's a line worthy of contemplation. We are quite adept at taking hold of life – sometimes with impressive aggression. But the life we tend to grasp is often fractured and false: defined in opposition to others, inflated by our own conceits, driven by greed, darkened by suspicion, and continually hollowed by insatiability. In all these ways, we set chasms between us – chasms that soon enough we determine to be irreparable because they are judged to be right and therefore are justified. And, thereby, we dismiss or abandon or condemn one another, claiming higher ground.

But Paul urges us to radically re-conceive our world. It is no longer defined by threat and judgment, divinely insured; the cross has destroyed this illusion. Our world is, rather, the venue of God's persistent grace shown without exception. What is true, at a deeper level than right or wrong are, as he lists them: faith, love, endurance, gentleness, and generosity. These reveal the righteousness of God, which overcomes evil and, more importantly, surpasses good. The freedom given us in Jesus is the ability, when looking at anyone, to see first in her or him the face of Christ, and thereby, to imagine all divisions bridged. This is the first step to true justice. Which then in real terms can be progressively, materially realized, with joy instead of with grumbling.

The church was never meant to do the bidding of the status quo, keeping order. What we are urged to do in Jesus' name is to cross the very chasms that everyone else insists are ordained in the heavens, which consign others to hell. But this division is no more. -- And to live life that really is life is to continually step out and step forward in a different trust. With

gladness and thanksgiving as the ground under our feet, it is to let nothing thwart our embrace of one another – because embrace is the only judgment of God.

How destructive now is all our public rhetoric. What the world needs more than all else is the emergence of the true church – the true church made incarnate in you and in me.

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