

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 29, 2019
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Church of the Holy Cross

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15, Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16, 1 Timothy 6:6-19, Luke 16:19-31

From My Head to My Heart

Who am I in the story? This is the question that haunted me from the Gospel today. Am I Lazarus, suffering from lack of resources, pained, hungry, humbled by my need to beg, lost, self-conscious. Am I the rich man in the story, ignoring Lazarus at my gate? Feeding my dogs, and enjoying my life while others suffer? Or perhaps I am a dog in the story, knowing that I depend on others, at least I try and sooth the wounds of those in pain, but have nothing to give myself. Maybe I am Abraham, watching the story unfold and then mansplaining how it works to the rich man. Or, am. I, are we the siblings of the rich man? Who are you in the story?

I want to think that I am Lazarus in the story, sitting with Abraham, and having been faithful in my life, and now enjoying paradise. Lazarus? Who am I kidding? I own a home, I am well fed, drive a cool little car and want for nothing. By the world's standards I am at the top of the heap. I am a sister to the rich man, and Abraham's words are for me. Abraham tells the rich man that his brothers have Moses and the prophets, and they should listen to them. The rich man argues that if someone goes to them from the dead, his brothers will repent. Abraham does not agree, and pushes the point that If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, they won't be convinced even if someone rises from the dead. The rich man asks to send Lazarus to his brothers, what, as a ghost? Who believes in ghosts? Raise your hand. Now, raise your hand if you believe but was afraid to raise your hand the first time. When I preached on Matthew when Jesus walks on the water the story tells us that when the apostles are in the boat and see Jesus walking on the water, they immediately think he is a ghost and are afraid. Apparently, the people in the Bible acknowledge that there are ghosts. They openly talk about them and they seem to accept them. When we talk about our relationship to God, it does take faith to look past only what we know of the world, and live into the wonder and mystery that is yet to be revealed to us, and we hide what we fear and do not understand.

Back to the Gospel. All this talk about ghosts got me thinking about stories I could tell for this sermon. I know it is too early to be talking about *A Christmas Carol*, but Charles Dickens was onto something. A miser learns the true meaning of Christmas when ghosts visit to review his past and foretell his future. In the Gospel a rich man begs Abraham to send the ghost of Lazarus so his brothers may repent.

I like to think that Abraham is wrong. I like to think that sending someone back from the dead can turn us around, to repent of our ways. I like to think that even I can be saved. I have confidence that Jesus rose from the dead, and that I am saved. But in reading the Gospel, and then thinking about Ebenezer Scrooge, I wonder if the repentance message I received in my head, actually found a home in my heart.

I can give to the church, make sandwiches for the homeless, pack backpacks for foster kids, yet I still cross the street when I see a homeless person, or walk past a beggar and think—even for a moment—he looks fit enough, why doesn't he just get a job? It is really easy to see the sins and deficiencies in other people. We often try and remove the preverbal plank from the eye of another, all the while having a huge plank of our own, obstructing our sight. I constantly need to be reminded that being poor is not a crime! Self-centeredness, judgment, and greed, oh my! Self-centeredness, judgment, and greed – are traps we lock ourselves into, because judgement is self-limiting, not world limiting. When you judge someone, when you decide who somebody else is, you take away your opportunity to ever see them as someone else. I admit that the rich man in this story is a piece of work. Even in death, being tormented in hell, he

still thinks of himself as one who deserves to be served. He commands Abraham to bid Lazarus dip his finger in water and come quench my thirst. Be open enough to look for growth and change in people, but do not be surprised if some people never learn. And, the trick is not to be one of them.

If there is any good news in all of this, it is, I think, that we are the “brothers”—and sisters—of the rich man in the story. We have time to follow Jesus, the one who died for us and was risen from the dead. We have time to change our ways, and listen to the prophets and heed their words. Many years ago, Simon and Garfunkle wrote the song, *Sound of Silence*. The lyrics read, “...the words of the prophets, are written on the subway walls and tenement halls...” Words calling us to repent our ways are in the places where the poor are trying to survive. If there is anything good about social media, it is that the words of our modern-day prophets have found a new outlet in Facebook. I say that because that is where I recently read the words, “Being poor is not a crime.” Lazarus was not a criminal. Perhaps I am the criminal, in taking advantage and working in systems that have been designed to oppress people who do not look like me. When I buy goods from companies who use child labor or pay unfair wages. Am I a criminal when I invest in war machines and corporations built on the backs of slaves? Are my hands clean? Has the message to repent really gotten from my head to my heart? Then I realize that I too am just trying to survive – we all are. Even those in nicer houses, eating better food, and not worrying about earthly wants and needs are just trying to make their way through life. So now, what do we do? How do we get what we hear and know is right from our heads to our hearts?

I think we start by remembering that we are saved, and then we go from there. We make more conscious choices. We treat every person with dignity—after all, upholding the dignity of all people is our Baptismal covenant. We remember who we are and whose we are, and remember that Jesus longs to draw the whole world to Himself, not just the rich, and the privileged. I need to remember every day, that being poor is not a crime. And, but for the grace of God, go I—because everything is fragile, and everything breaks, and floods, fire, and hurricanes never ask for your credit score before they take out your home, or your family. We are all in this together.

*My friend Liz said of this Gospel, “There have been any number of wonderful, heartwarming, soul-stirring things that have happened to me in my life. And there have also been a number of backbreaking, excruciatingly tragic things that have happened. I’ve come to believe that all of these occurrences are just part of life. I’ve also stopped referring to being ‘blessed’ when something good happens because if I do that, then I have to embrace the converse as well...I must be cursed if something bad happens. What I am fond of saying, however, when something good happens is, “The Lord provides sweet compensations!” Believing that good fortune is an indication of God’s blessings to us implies that those who are not fortunate are not loved or blessed by God. Nothing could be farther from the truth as the gospels proclaim: “Blessed are the poor for yours is the kingdom of heaven.” And Jesus’ announcement of his mission on earth: “I have come to bring good news to the poor,” and “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.” Apparently, being blessed by God has nothing to do with being wealthy. So much for the Prosperity Gospel.”**

Live your best life. Enjoy the good fortunes that may come to you, but remember the poor. No one could cross the divide between Lazarus and the Rich man, but we have the time and the means to build a bridge between the things that divide us as people—race, wealth, gender, opportunity, religion, culture, and customs—we can build a bridge over all of these—meet in the middle and greet each other as children of God. **Amen.**

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