

Pastor's Message - 9/25/2022
Luke 16:19-31

Our Bible passage last week was a difficult passage to process. What does it mean to us to hear Jesus praise a dishonest manager? What does it mean to use worldly wealth to make friends? It is much easier and much more fun to preach good news, like three weeks ago when we heard the Word of God through Jeremiah wherein God creates good even out of broken and flawed pots.

Little good news in the passage today. There is definite threat in Jesus' words today that, unless we straighten up and fly right, we'll be on the wrong side of the crevasse. Preaching ought to be more about good news than about bad news. Else, we are not proclaiming the gospel. However, the gospel is not true without a clear acknowledgement of just how bad the news can be. That's why sermons ought to be very clear-eyed about the deep trouble in our world. We must be honest.

But trouble is not the end of the story. Church is not the only place where people hear bad news (or good news either, for that matter). Turn on a talk radio station. Bad news. Facebook feeds and internet news pages are often full of troubles ... with the occasional cat video thrown in. People come to hear us preach, asking, "Is there a Word from the Lord?" All of us come to church asking, in the words of that Peggy Lee song, "Is that all there is?"

It's easy to beat up on people and some passages in the Bible when they do not offer us any good news. Today may be one of those days. As I read this parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, good news is hard to find. "There was a certain rich man who was splendidly clothed in purple and fine linen and who lived each day in luxury."

When this story was first heard, wealth was understood to be a sign of God's favor and poverty a sign of God's displeasure. If you're rich, the gospel puts you in a difficult spiritual position, and some people might say, "Thank God none of us are there. We don't have to worry about that." But yet we are there. We have certain privileges that we don't even see.

But the point of the parable for us seems pretty simple. Privilege, if we have it, often has a blinding effect. *The Oxford Dictionary* defines "privilege" as a "special right, advantage or immunity granted or available only to a particular person or group of people." Usually, that

privileged group is the dominant one in a particular culture. What Jesus seems to be telling us is that seeing past our privilege is tough to do.

We can, if we wish, arrange to be in the company of people like us most of the time. We can flock together with birds of a feather. We can wear our grubbies without having people attribute choice of clothing to bad morals, poverty, or illiteracy. We can teach our children that the police are our allies and here to protect us. We're not going to get pulled over by those police because of our skin color.

It's become quite common in the last 30 years or so to talk not just about "good news for the poor" but about God's "bias for the poor;" and this always provokes questions. Surely God loves the rich as well? Surely God doesn't have favorites?

But, it seems, God is especially concerned about the poor – as our Bible reading suggests this week; but we can't let this distort how we see things. There can be no bias in God, and all people must be equally the objects of His love.

But the other mistake, at least as serious, is to think that justice for the poor is simply a command from God: we now have to be nicer to the unfortunate because God will punish us if we aren't. And the truth is something far more remarkable and exciting. We learn to let go of our anxious struggle for material security as we learn that we are the receivers of immeasurable gifts and that our privilege and joy is to transmit and share that gift in every way possible to others.

That is why the Christian passion for justice in society can neither be just a matter of trying to keep rules set by God or just a matter of respecting human rights. The modern idea of human rights is a useful shorthand for what people may expect from each other in society – but it's a notion that never appears in the Bible, for the simple reason that the Bible is interested not in abstract rights but in how the love and gift of God shatters those instincts in us that keep the needy at arms' length and gives real hope and dignity to the powerless. God's love creates community not first and foremost by giving orders but by changing how we see ourselves and each other.

What we see depends upon where we look – our focus. The word "vision" comes from the Latin root meaning "see." A dream or vision is one of the most powerful forces in the universe. Like any mighty energy, our visions can help or hurt us because they become self-fulfilling prophecies. What we see is what we get.

At the heart of our story today is not what the rich man possesses, but what he lacks. He lacked the ability to see what he had and what he could give. How easy it is for us to hear the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus and wonder in our hearts how it is that the rich man did not share his abundance with one that sat outside his door.... For us to bow our heads with the rich man's regret and never recognize how easily we, too, withhold the very things of life and death from neighbors and friends...sure, we'd never withhold food from the starving (those we can see) ...Sure, we happily share our abundance (if we have any) ...

Funny thing...the most precious gift we have been given is our faith in God through Jesus Christ, and yet it is this very thing that we seem to share the least. It is the presence of the Kingdom of God and all its blessings in our midst that we sometimes fail to talk about. The finale of the story isn't a blow simply to "the rich." From now on, it's about the kingdom of God. And in God's kingdom, as even Moses and the prophets were saying to those who had ears to hear, the poor are blessed, the hungry are fed, the naked are clothed, the sick are cared for and healed.

The good news in our story today might be in verses 22 and 25. "[Finally] the poor man died and was carried by the angels to sit beside Abraham at the heavenly banquet." "[So] now he is here being comforted . . ." the good news, in this parable of much bad news, is the gospel story about a God who crosses great chasms. There is grace in the text: Christ sees our humanity, crosses the chasm, and joins us in our life.

That's why repentance is always linked to rising from the dead! I'm not talking about feeling-sorry repentance. I'm talking about *metanoia*-style repentance or changing the way you think! The rich man thinks that if Lazarus rises from the dead, it will create repentance in his brothers. "Nope," Jesus says, "probably not." However, in Luke 24, Jesus says "the Messiah is ... to rise from the dead on the third day, and that *repentance (metanoia) and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations ...*" (46-47).

That's what makes the difference. Hearing the law (what we *ought* to do) is important, but it will not change us on its own. For our thinking to change, we need to see and know something else. We need to see that God sees us and hears us in our humanity and offers the grace of His presence and love. Just as God heard the cries of his

people at the beginning of Exodus and sent Moses, just as God heard the cries of widows and orphans and sent the prophets, so also God sees women and men, slave and free, Jew and gentile. God sees our beauty, and God sees our deep brokenness. God grieves over all the words that God had given to us to help us live good and free lives that are not heard, all the laws that we had broken. And God understood in that moment that ethical instruction, just giving the Law, while crucial and important, was not enough. So, God gathered up all of God's glory, power, and might. God collected all of God's purity, and excellence, and holiness and shared that with humanity.

And Jesus, God's own Son, who was "in the form of God, [but] did not count equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness" (Philippians 2:4-6). He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:7-8).

There is no chasm that God will not cross, there is no cost that God will not spend to change our thinking. God continues to teach us how to live, but not without first submitting our pride, our violence, and our self-centeredness.

Where did it all begin? God heard...

God heard the cries of His people. God still hears, still offers grace, and still offers His Holy Spirit to teach us to see and hear the cries of the poor and offers that same gift to call and welcome us. It's easy for us to see that sitting beside Abraham is a metaphor for heaven. It's a great song to sing, "When we all get to heaven, what a day of rejoicing that will be!" We have been given enough for us to see the way, and all we have to do is follow.

I suspect that most of us understand full well what we're being told in this story. The challenge is to take what we now know and translate it into action whenever and wherever possible. We need to look around and see the many different faces of Lazarus that surround us – the many and different people who need our material expressions of support and encouragement. They're everywhere. We just need to open our eyes to see them. If we don't, Jesus clearly suggests, we'll receive a stiff penalty from which there'll be no opportunity to recover.

May we take the Lord's word to heart and begin with renewed earnest, to care for the broken and beggarly of our world – not so much out of fear for our eternal well-being, but out of love for their earthly well-being with the same love that has been shown to us.