

Proper 21, Year "C": Amos 6:1-7; Psalm 146:4-9; 1 Tim. 6:11-19; Luke 16:19-13

Title: There is enough

Well, we have this most intriguing Gospel story this morning. This story told by Jesus of a rich man who goes to hell and a poor man who was 'carried away by the angels to be with Abraham – that is to say the poor man who went to heaven. To speak of someone as having gone to rest in the bosom of Abraham would be like one of us saying so'n so went to meet their maker. It's just part of the language.

So, what are we to make of this story?

Just a few chapters earlier in this very same Gospel, Luke reports Jesus as saying, "And behold, some who are last will be first, and some are first who will be last."¹ Now, I have to admit that, to me, is one of the more puzzling things Jesus ever said. So if maybe like me you've ever wondered what Jesus meant by that statement let me suggest that we might find something of an explanation embedded in this little story, also from Jesus, about the rich man and the beggar Lazarus. That is, one only has to change the words slightly to hear Jesus saying, "And behold, some who are poor will become rich, and some who are rich will be poor."

Note that there is no evidence in the story to indicate that the rich man was in any way somehow conspicuously wicked. Nowhere in the story, for example, does it say that the rich man made a practice of taking advantage of the poor. Doesn't say his riches were ill gotten. Doesn't really tell us much of anything about the rich man other than he was rich.

Likewise, the story tells us very little about the beggar, Lazarus – except that he was poor. We are told nothing really about whether he was a good man or bad man. All we know is that he was a very poor man. He was a man who is very much on the bottom rung of the economic ladder as well as the ladder of well-being.

But, if we listen carefully there is *one other thing* about the rich man that we know. It is that though there is no indication that the rich man is hostile to the poor, there is every indication that he was *indifferent* to the needs of the poor. The rich man was, in fact, indifferent to the need that was at his own gate in the person of Lazarus. And the rich man was apparently smugly secure in his comfortable life and superior status.

Oh, he was apparently more than willing to have the beggar sit at his gate. The rich man was more than willing to see that the poor beggar received the scraps from his well-supplied table. As long as such things did not impinge on his own life style, he was willing to be compassionate.

¹ Luke 13:30

Dear ones, this story given us in the Gospel of Luke is not, I'm sure, meant to suggest that there is anything wrong with seeking a reasonable degree of comfort in our lives, as well as safety and security. Neither do I think that it is intended to suggest that wealth, in and of itself, is a bad thing. But this story might well lead us in the direction of the question: How much is enough? How much do I really need? Considering my circumstance – given my blessings -- how much would God have me keep for myself and how much would God have me give to accomplish those things God would have accomplished? How is God calling me to manage that which I have? And additionally this story without apology points us to the question: How concerned does God ask me to be about that which oppresses the poor? How might God be calling me to translate my concern and compassion for the poor into action on their behalf?

John DeGraff coined the word -- Affluenza. By the term affluenza he means the disease of consumerism gone wild. By the term affluenza he means to say that the search for wholeness does not begin with a trip to the mall. Rather, and quite to the contrary, it might mean beginning the process of downsizing -- literally divesting ourselves of some of our stuff.

Columnist Leonard Pitts writing in the Miami Herald was commenting on this concept of consumerism gone wild, and even as a secular columnist he observed that the most alarming thing about affluenza is its effect on the spirit. In his column, he mused that “the shopping mall has become the mega-church of consumerism, and the act of purchasing is its sacrament.”

The story of how DeGraff became such a champion for the cause of simplicity is an interesting one. He once worked on a Navajo Indian Reservation where the average annual income – now note I said ‘annual’ income – was \$600 a year. Yet, he noted that the children never seemed to be bored or want for something to do to entertain themselves. Then he went home to his brother’s house for Christmas where the kids kept complaining that they had nothing to do, even though their rooms looked like an advertisement for a toy store. For DeGraff this was an epiphany.

Back to columnist Leonard Pitts: He wrote that, for some, buying becomes as habitual as breathing. The problem is that *we can never buy enough to feel whole*. Wholeness will never be found in our stuff. Wholeness will only be found in our relationship to God and the things of God; and the ways of God, and in our relationships to one another – including and maybe *especially* towards our neighbors who are in need.

Let me share a little piece of data I ran across recently. It is this: Depending on where you go to get your statistics we know that somewhere between 6 million and 14 million infants and children will die on this planet this year from lack of food and/or lack of health care. Even if you accept the most conservative of these figures that means that this very day, before we turn down the covers on our beds this evening, the equivalent of 35 jumbo jets full of children will die from neglect and starvation.

Is there enough to take care of and feed these children? Sure there is. Is there enough to meet the need? Sure there is. The answer does not lie in the question, ‘Is there enough?’ There is enough. The better question is, the more strategic question is - do those who have enough have the political, social, moral, and ecclesiastical will to attend to the basic needs of the ‘have-nots.’ This is the fundamental question presented in this

story this morning that springs from the rich man's indifference to the need of his poor neighbor.

My friends this is nothing new. Luke tells us nothing new by way of his reporting this Jesus story. Actually, even Jesus says very little that had not been said before him. . When we hear this story our minds should race back to the words of Moses and the prophets who warned over, and over, and over again that to be in comfort while taking no regard for the poor is an abomination to all that is holy. Or as someone else has put it: Where apathy exists in the face of relievable pain and suffering, Christ is not present.

Or to imagine that one's good fortune is due somehow to one's superior status in the eyes of God is pure folly. It is also folly to imagine that one can take comfort in ones self-sufficiency as something somehow not dependent upon good fortune and God's grace.

This theme runs deep through both the Old and New Testaments. It is one of those themes, chords if you will, that I often speak of tethering the Old Testament to the New and the New to the Old all leading to a kind of unity in the Gospels. The mandate having to do with compassion for the poor is one of those themes that is repeated so often and in so many ways in Holy Scripture that it is as if God, Godself, is saying, "Don't miss this because this is really important."

Dear ones there is enough. Jesus isn't saying that we should apologize for the money we have. Jesus isn't saying that he or the church, the Bride of Christ wants our money. Jesus is saying he wants our lives. If Jesus has our lives, the church and the things of the church will be just fine.

If Jesus has our lives the poor will be fed and will be satisfied.

If Jesus has our lives the Kingdom of God will be in evidence and things on earth will be as it is in heaven – a thing that we, of course, anticipate and pray for each and every Sunday just prior to coming to this table.

If Jesus has our lives Lazarus will be fed, and Lazarus' sores will be healed, and Lazarus will be housed. Lazarus will know that he is loved. Not because someone responded out of guilt, or even out of their abundance. Lazarus will know that he is loved because someone has responded to this Gospel and because someone has loved the things and has loved those whom Jesus loved.

When I was a little boy growing up in St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Brunswick, Georgia as prescribed by the 1928 Book of Common Prayer, every week just prior to taking up the weekly offering, we repeated a phrase which is taken from Chapter 20, verse 35 of the Acts of the Apostles wherein Jesus is quoted as saying, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

Ever wonder what was the context of this quote? Well, it is this: The apostle Paul was on his way to Jerusalem – a journey he felt in his Spirit he was called to take. It would be in Jerusalem that he would be arrested and begin his final journey to Rome where he was to be tried for disturbing the *Pax Romana* – the peace in the land – the

Roman peace. In other words, he was to be tried for speaking the Gospel truth. Here he was speaking to the elders of the church at Miletus and Ephesus. It was his farewell address to them for he knew he would never see them again. And so we might imagine that he wanted to leave them with a message that he believed to be important, foundational even to their lives and to their faith journeys. And upon his departure here is what he said:

And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities, and to those who were with me. In all things I have shown you that by so toiling one must help the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, "*It is more blessed to give than to receive.*"

And when he had spoken thus, he knelt down and prayed with them all. And they all wept and embraced Paul, and kissed him, sorrowing most of all because of the word he had spoken...." (Acts 20:32-38a).

And those, dear ones, were the last words that the church in Ephesus ever heard from he who founded the church: ... "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

Amen.