

The Reverend Marjo Anderson

**C: 16th Sunday after Pentecost / Lectionary 26/ Proper 21
(Amos 6:1a, 4-7, Psalm 146, 1 Timothy 6:6-19) Luke 16:19-31**

**25 September 2022
Salem, Bridgeport**

“The Good News that Afflicts and Changes Us”

So with whom do you identify more - the rich man or the poor man?

If you're like me, it's much more comfortable for me to see myself somewhere between the two
because I'm certainly not as rich as that rich guy, and I'm certainly not as poor as Lazarus!
So instead, let me invite you to see things not from the rich man's vantage point nor from Lazarus's view,
but rather to try to image things from God's perspective....

God created the entire universe, including this planet called earth, & decided to form beings in the divine image.
These earth creatures, these humans, therefore, would also be creators,
and in order to create they would need the ability to make choices – to choose
between creating beauty or ugliness, doing good or evil, bringing about life or death.

Now if you were God, what would you like to see when you looked down on this world?

[A world where everyone has enough food and water, enough clothing and shelter,
enough education and medical care, enough work and leisure, enough love and support.
A world without selfishness or greed, poverty or crime, violence or war.
A world where everyone has the opportunity
to live up to their full God-given potential and fulfill their God-given purpose in life.]
That's what God wants to see.

But instead God looks down & sees a world divided into two parts – those who have enough & those who don't.
And that's how it's been since human beings first exercised their choice
to love themselves more than they loved God or their neighbor,

So what did God do with these errant human beings?
God chose to make a covenant with Abraham & Sarah
in which God would make them to be the father and mother of a people
whom God would bless so that they could be a blessing.
But that didn't quite do the job, so God gave Moses the Law that would help people make the right choices.
But people found ways to skirt the Law; and so God sent the prophets.
But people didn't listen to the prophets; and so God sent Jesus.

And here Jesus tells a story which gets at the very heart of the problem.
All throughout both the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Scriptures,
it is clear that when it comes to those who have enough and those who don't, God is on the side of those who don't.
When it comes to those who are privileged as a race or oppressed as a race,
God is on the side of those who are oppressed.
When it comes to those who have power by virtue of their gender, or their sexual orientation,
or their national origin, or their level of education, or their abilities, or anything else,
and those who are marginalized due to their gender, sexual orientation, national origin,
education, or ability, God is on the side of the marginalized.
The Bible consistently tells us that God cares most for the least, the lost, and the last.
And here Jesus is simply reiterating that point.
God is not on the side of the rich man; God is on the side of Lazarus.

I would so like to see myself as in the middle, but there is no middle in this story,
There are only the haves represented by the rich man and the have-nots represented by Lazarus.
I would love if there was a middle option
because then I wouldn't be forced to identify with either the rich or the poor and I would be off the hook.

But I don't read the Bible & I don't come to church in order to get myself off the hook – or at least I shouldn't. As I was taught in seminary, the point of Jesus' teaching, the point of the gospel, the point of any good sermon is "to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable"!

And so, when it comes to having enough of the material things in life –
food and clothing and shelter and healthcare and education and work,

I am among those who have – and so this story makes me feel afflicted.

But the purpose of being afflicted is not to make me feel angry or guilty or hopeless.

The purpose of being afflicted by God's Word is to force me out of my comfort zone

so that God can change me, and by changing me, God can work through me to work change in the world,

And how does God change us? Well the secret is right there in the story

In his life, the rich man's eyes were not open and he didn't see Lazarus

or if he glimpsed him at all it was simply as part of a vague background best ignored.

The even if the rich man saw Lazarus with his eyes, his mind was not open to apprehend him as a man who was as deserving of the basic needs of life as the rich man, himself.

No, to the rich man's mind, Lazarus must, for some reason or another, deserve his fate just as the rich man most certainly deserved his.

And even if the rich man saw Lazarus and apprehended him as a man, his heart was closed to him.

Lazarus was an ugly gash across the beautiful painting of the rich man's life.

He was certainly not seen as a brother whom God loved as much as he loved the rich man.

The rich man in this story had closed his eyes and his mind and his heart

so that he wouldn't have to see or understand or have compassion on Lazarus.

And it's his closed eyes and mind and heart that cause him to end up in hell.

And from his torment in hell he begs God to send Lazarus to warn his brothers and to that God replies,

"But I already have. I've given them the Law and the Prophets, but they haven't listened."

"But if you send someone from the dead they will hear!" cries the rich man now in torment.

And so in actual fact God does send someone back from the dead – Jesus –

and what is the result after over 2000 years of Christianity? We still live in a world of haves and have-nots.

Now I understand that that can leave us feeling very afflicted.

And that feeling of being afflicted can easily turn into anger (sometimes at the messenger!)

or it can lead us into despair or hopelessness.

But that's not where affliction is meant to push us.

It's meant to push us from guilt to repentance.

And all that repentance requires is that we open our eyes to see what we have not yet seen,

open our ears to hear what we have not yet heard,

open our minds to understand things from a new perspective,

and open our hearts to truly love those we have not yet loved.

<if time, share story of planned famine banquet>

We cannot do that if we stay where we have always been and try to do what we've always done.

Instead we must listen for God's voice, leave the old behind, and follow wherever God leads.

Jesus promised that after he left this earth

God would baptize followers of Jesus with the Holy Spirit and with fire –

and that the Spirit would give them the power and authority to do far greater things than even Jesus.

I happen to believe that. I hope you do too.

And so let me close with prayer.

God, open our eyes so we can see what you want us to see.

Open our ears so we can hear what you want us to hear.

Open our minds to understand all that you want us to understand.

Open our hearts to love like we've never loved before.

And most of all, God, open our spirits that we might be baptized with your Holy Spirit and with fire that will empower us to do all the amazing things you are even now calling us to do! Amen