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Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, September 25, 2022
16th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 26/Year C

First Reading: Amos 6:1a, 4-7

Second Reading: 1 Timothy 6:6-19

Gospel Reading: Luke 16:19-31

Sermon Title: “Reversal in Fortune”

Theme

Consideration of and care for those in need (especially those “at our gate,” visible to us, of whom we are aware) is an essential component of good stewardship. It is in the sharing of wealth that we avoid the snare of wealth. It is the one whom death could not hold—who comes to us risen from the dead—who can free us from the death grip of greed.

Texts:

First Reading: Amos 6:1a, 4-7

^{1a}Alas for those who are at ease in Zion,
and for those who feel secure on Mount Samaria,

⁴Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory,
and lounge on their couches,
and eat lambs from the flock,
and calves from the stall;

⁵who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp,
and like David improvise on instruments of music;

⁶who drink wine from bowls,
and anoint themselves with the finest oils,
but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!

⁷Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile,
and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away.

Second Reading: 1 Timothy 6:6-19

⁶Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; ⁷for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; ⁸but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. ⁹But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.

¹¹But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance,

gentleness. ¹²Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. ¹³In the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you ¹⁴to keep the commandment without spot or blame until the manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁵which he will bring about at the right time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords. ¹⁶It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see; to him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.

¹⁷As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. ¹⁸They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, ¹⁹thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

Gospel: Luke 16:19-31

Jesus tells a parable in which the poor one is “lifted up” and the rich one is “sent away empty.” Jesus makes it clear that this ethic of merciful reversal is not new but is as old as Moses and the prophets.

[Jesus said:] ¹⁹“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. ²²The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.’ ²⁵But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. ²⁶Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’ ²⁷He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house—²⁸for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ ²⁹Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ ³⁰He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ ³¹He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

Sermon

How could anyone stand to have a poor man lying in their doorway, covered with sores, those sores being licked by stray dogs – a poor man who begged for nothing but the crumbs that fall from the table of the wealthy? Aren't we outraged that this rich man, dressed in fine purple linen, who feasted sumptuously every day, ignored this poor man? We're not surprised when the rich man ends up in Hades. By the way, Hades is known as the place of eternal torment; some have translated it as Hell. There the rich man can't even get a tiny drink of water. It serves him right, we might be thinking. What was that rich man thinking? We'd never do that to anyone, would we?

It's easy to feel pretty self-righteous about the rich man. It's also easy to think that this isn't a hard parable to understand. The poor man who suffered on earth was rewarded in heaven because those with the means to help him while he was alive didn't. And the rich man who had more than enough – lots more than enough – was sent to Hades because he didn't share. "Serves him right," we say.

It's a lesson we hear all the time, especially in the church; those of us who are so blessed must see that those with nothing get the assistance they need to live a decent life. If you're rich, give to the poor. This is obviously a moral lesson for rich people, rich churches, and rich nations - and there you have it. So we're done here, and we can all go home, right?

If you have a red letter edition of the Bible, then you will notice that in the middle of the Gospel of Luke, chapters 10-18, almost the entire text is red. Jesus was on a preaching and teaching frenzy! But, you see, Jesus was not preaching and teaching about how to avoid hell and get into heaven. No Jesus taught that ^{10:9}"the kingdom of God has come near." And by that he meant, that since he, Jesus, the Son of God, broke into the darkness of human sinfulness, his mission was to preach and teach the true loving, graceful, and merciful nature of his Heavenly Father, and our Heavenly Father. And not only did he preach and teach it, but he revealed it with his own example. Jesus ended his series of teachings with this parable that teaches a lesson that pertains to every one of us.

And a closer look at the verses that come after this passage are telling. The disciples pleaded with Jesus to, ^{17:5}"Increase our faith!"

What does that mean? What do they want? It seems not to matter because what they got was Jesus telling them they have to change. Jesus preached and taught what it means that the Kingdom of God has come near, which means he preached and taught a different way of living, a different way of *seeing*.

To live in the Kingdom of God is to *see* people differently. Take our Food Distribution Ministry. Do we feed the hungry because we think it's the right thing to do? Some of us would probably answer yes, and that isn't a bad answer. But Jesus would teach that a better answer is that we feed the hungry because we *see* their hunger, *see* them as if we ourselves were hungry, and act generously, because having *seen* them, we enter into their suffering. Jesus taught that to *see* another the way God *sees* is to live in the Kingdom of God.

- Maybe the disciples were a little bit nervous when they asked Jesus to increase their faith. After all this teaching means they have fallen short of living godly lives. They may be beginning to see where they've fallen short and they don't want to end up like the rich man.
- Maybe they're thinking it might be better to suffer now and wind up standing at the side of Abraham in eternal life.
- Maybe suffering here and now is the guarantee of blessing there and then? You know, suffer now; take up your cross; if life here is tough, don't worry, heaven is paved with streets of gold.

Yes, of course, there's a great deal of suffering in the world. There are people like Lazarus all around us. Maybe we don't *see* them lying at the gates of grand houses surrounded by dogs licking their wounds, but we *see* them lying on the streets of our cities if we look for them.

Some of you will remember that several years ago I flew out to California to bring my son, Aaron home. I flew into San Francisco and the homeless encampments on the city streets were something I've never *seen* before.

To be honest, we don't *see* homelessness, poverty, and hunger like that around here very much. Oh it exists, we just don't *see* it. Some of them we don't *see* at all. Poverty today is often a hidden problem – and that's the point! Jesus was not teaching his disciples that they/we need to be poor too. He was teaching them/us that *we are* poor too, for every last one of God's children is dependent on God for

everything, even for life itself. And he was also teaching that they/we need to *see* the suffering that goes on in our community.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

I entitled this sermon, "Reversal in Fortune" and the reason might be obvious. Lazarus was poor and miserable and the unnamed rich man was wealthy and merciless. And by the end of the parable, there was a reversal of fortune. Lazarus was in the bosom of Abraham, a metaphor for heaven, while the unnamed rich man was in Hell's eternal torment.

Does it seem strange to you that we know Lazarus's name and we don't know the name of the rich man? That says something about the value system in the Kingdom of God. There are, and have been, and always will be millions of people who, like the unnamed rich man, had the means and the opportunity to prosper the Kingdom of God – to make the world a better place for all – and don't. I think the lack of a name for the merciless rich man is Jesus's way of saying he is anathema to God. God is so disgusted by him and people like him, that God cannot even speak their names. But poor miserable Lazarus, he was named, and we are talking about him today, and he is just a character in a parable!

Now you might be thinking that this parable and my sermon are about teaching the rich that if they aren't more generous they're gonna burn in hell. Not so! First of all, if you are hearing my voice, then you are probably a Christian and you realize that you are blessed - all Christians should have an understanding of our blessedness.

The Apostle Paul, the presumed author of the Second Reading from First Timothy, taught that being Christian is a much grander deal than simply being generous with one's wealth. He also taught that Christians are to ¹¹"pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, [and] gentleness." We who are so blessed are to live like that and use our blessedness to do good works so that we bring glory and honor to God – which is the first priority of all human beings.

God created us and all people out of love, and so God is invested in and cares for every person – even those who want nothing to do with God. Therefore those of us who recognize that we live in the Kingdom of God in the here and now should do

the same – be invested in and care for every person. We share out of our blessedness, whatever blessedness we have, that is, and that sharing puts us in a position to receive as well. Work with me now.

What could the rich man have received from Lazarus if he had been willing to open himself to the possibility?

- Maybe he could have learned from Lazarus how to be thankful for a healthy body as well as a fine house and table.
- Maybe if he had given to Lazarus he could have learned the joy of receiving a gift that wasn't earned.
- Maybe he could have learned the joy of giving a gift that was hardly consequential in his treasury, but it meant hope to poor old Lazarus. The Book of Common Prayer says it well: “Do not let the hope of the poor be taken away.”

Lazarus was not just a poor beggar, but a fellow human being, another child of God, someone else created by God in God's image. God's care for all of us means that everyone in need of hope should be able to find it. And we should pray that God would find us worthy to be his deliverers of hope.

Prayer

Lord God have mercy on us – all of us. Today we have learned that the poor and the wealthy are not that different. All are needy of something and at the same time all are blessed to receive the gift of your love, grace, and mercy. Cause us to meet each other and share the hope that we have been given, so that your kingdom will be visible in our time. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen