

Sermon: C Proper 21 2016
St. Augustine's-in-the-Woods
28 September 2016
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Luke 16:19-31
Amos 6:1A, 4-7
1 Timothy 6:6-19
Psalm 146

Every morning after my prayers I read a couple of inspirational messages online. One is keyed to the daily readings while the other offers a short, pithy quotation and a lovely photograph taken around St. Mary's Convent in Sewanee, Tennessee. One day this past week the quotation was from Mahatma Gandhi: "An eye for an eye only ends up making the whole world blind." Jimmy Carter's words inspired me another day: "Go out on a limb. That's where the fruit is." The one that caught my attention as I was beginning to wrestle with the scripture for today said "It is our choices that show who we really are, far more than our abilities." Signed by Professor Dumbledore! Harry Potter fans will recognize his name.

Inspiration can come from any number of sources, Holy Scripture being a primary source for Jews and Christians, but wise words and good stories from any tradition can touch our hearts. In today's Gospel Jesus tells a well-known story of his time to make a strong statement about wealth to Pharisees who had already chosen not to hear what Jesus had to say.

Pharisees were well-educated in Torah, but, as a group, they subscribed to a minority interpretation of Hebrew scripture from Deuteronomy. Writings of the Deuteronomist have a particular slant on history that is formulaic, prescriptive, and, in some ways, contrary to Torah, the Law under which Hebrew life is supposed to be conducted. The Deuteronomist held that if you obey God, God will bestow great blessings upon you; in other words, you will be successful and rich. In Jesus' day many believed that if you were poor or weak or disabled it was because you must be out of favor with God. Pharisees, the rich, powerful guardians of Temple life in Jerusalem, held this view and along with it a sense of entitlement--we're the ones closest to God so we are blessed with riches and health and more will come because we deserve it. The sense of entitlement that went along with Deuteronomic thinking was especially offensive to Jesus as he confronted the Pharisees in today's Gospel with their choice of an archaic and narrow interpretation of Hebrew scripture that suited their lifestyle.

In Jesus' view, Deuteronomic interpretation was corrupt as it violated Hebrew Law. Torah is specific about the obligation to help the poor, casting no judgment upon the poor for being poor. Wealth is not God's special blessing; wealth is to be shared with those in need. If you were a wealthy farmer Torah commanded that at harvest time you were to leave the corners of your fields for the poor to harvest.

You see, I am sure, where this is all going in Jesus' telling of the vivid story of the rich man and Lazarus. In life, the rich man, sometimes called "Dives" (which means rich man) does not even see poor Lazarus outside his fancy gate. In death, Dives is being punished for his greed. He can now see Lazarus, but the chasm that divides him from Lazarus' comfort still has not awakened him to the real state of his soul as he implores Father Abraham to make Lazarus wait on him, to bring him water. Dives sense of entitlement is intact even in the torments of Hell!

If the Pharisees didn't get Jesus' message in this story I can't imagine what else could wake them up to the reality that their interpretation of Hebrew scripture was not only deeply contrary to Torah, but also dangerous to the fabric of Jewish life and to their own souls. . . just as it is today. God does not reward some people with wealth, nor punish others with poverty. Obeying God's commandments does not guarantee material success; we all know Godless, disreputable people who have tons of money! Jesus does not condemn wealth, but knows how easy it is for us to love possessions more than we love God and how easy it is to disregard the poor while basking comfortably in our own largesse. Jesus knew the Pharisees' attitude toward money prevented them from acknowledging and helping the poor as Torah commands, so he called them on it.

Are there people around today who do not see the poor? Of course there are. A politician in Louisiana spent most of his career dismantling the Charity Hospital system that had served the poor for generations. Talking about this one day, a psychiatrist I know said simply, "He was unable to see the poor; his upbringing prevented it. He chose to blame the poor for being poor so he saw no reason to care for them." Sadly, we know other people who think this way, as well.

Professor Dumbledore was right: Our choices reveal who we really are and what we are about far more than our abilities do. We can have all the smarts in the world and still choose not to see the reality of people in need.

Those who value Torah and follow Jesus are led to choose differently, but most of us need to be awakened to the needs of others by experiences with them.

In high school I belonged to a group whose service project was visiting children in an orphanage in Washington, D.C.. It was the first time I had ever been in such an institution and the first time I ever touched an black person. There was a darling little girl there with whom I jumped rope who then asked me to braid her hair. What a gift all that was to me! It woke me up not only to the goodness of the underprivileged but also to their plight and the necessity of doing whatever I could for them. A little African American girl changed my life that day.

The chasm between we privileged in this world and those who have so little disturbs me greatly, and I fear that chasm is growing larger. But I also know that with God's help we can choose to both see real need and also respond to it. We who hear Christ's word, can go out into the world and live it if we choose to.