

The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Amos 6:1a,4-7, Psalm 146, 1 Timothy 6:6-19, Luke 16:19-31 – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony – September 29, 2019.

Jesus was, among many other things, a story teller. He delighted in this way of teaching his disciples and the people who came to hear his preaching. We call many of his stories parables. They were and are stories that covered common ground, things which were familiar in the everyday lives of people. We can all appreciate the woman who searches diligently for a lost coin. We all hope that if we found ourselves in difficulties we would be helped by a Good Samaritan. We might even hope that we could be that Good Samaritan. Today's gospel is just such a parable. It is easy to understand even if when we search the heart of the matter it might be difficult or uncomfortable to hear.

The writer of the Gospel of Luke speaks of money matters more than any of the other gospel writers. The way in which God calls Christians to deal with money is a primary concern. For the disciples and the early church, the kingdom of God, heaven if you will, was both a future promise and the way life was to be lived each day. Wealth, or rather the way in which wealth is seen and used was viewed as a major stumbling block to living in the Kingdom of God here and now.

Heaven, in real time, lived each day, was the invitation to a life of compassion and justice, a life that put the community before the individual, and that shared the gifts of God with one another. Those gifts were both spiritual and material. That was the core of Judaism and the teaching of Jesus and it became the core of Christianity.

The audience to whom this parable is told are the Pharisees. The verses that precede our reading speak of the Pharisees as "...lovers of money," and as a group which ridiculed Jesus understanding of the use of resources. The Pharisees, as those who kept the Law strictly, and who saw themselves as particularly devout took a position on wealth based on the Biblical Book of Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy, literally second law, was the portion of the Torah that dealt with how a faithful Jew was to live. It seemed to say that when people thrived it was because they were particularly beloved and favored by God. If someone fell on hard times, it was seen as a punishment for their sins. Jesus took the opposite position. For him, material wealth belonged ultimately to the creator and God provided these gifts to human beings, to be used and shared by all. It was the core basis of the Jewish concept of justice. Justice is always linked with mercy. But, for justice and mercy to function as God intended, human beings must see clearly the world around them. We must be willing to be honest about what we have, what we need and what others in our sphere require to live.

And so, Jesus told a story, a parable about a rich man who had a life of good things, and about a poor man who had nothing and less than nothing. The story had at least for the Pharisees an unexpected ending. Being rich in material goods did not guarantee entry into heaven. This is a parable about seeing clearly the source of one's good fortune. It is a parable about how one values every human being. It is a story about justice and mercy or the lack of these core values.

The rich man clearly did not see Lazarus, who came each day to his gates to beg the scraps of food that would keep him alive. Imagine the rich man dressed in purple and fine linen, going in and out of his gates each day. He does not see what is at his feet, begging for compassion and mercy, hoping for justice and each day being overlooked. The rich man is not a bad man, simply blind to the realities of his surroundings.

As in the nature of life, both men eventually die. The rich man is buried and much to his surprise finds himself in Hades, in agony in the flames. Lazarus, who had none of the advantages, perhaps also to his surprise is carried by the angels to the arms of Abraham. In other words, Lazarus finds himself in heaven. Suddenly their positions are reversed. Lazarus has everything he could want or need.

The story turns to the conversation between the rich man and Abraham. First the rich man asks that Abraham send Lazarus with water to slake his thirst. When that is not possible, the rich man asks that Lazarus be sent to his father's house with a warning to his remaining brothers. That too is not to happen because it would be futile. The brothers have not believed Moses and the prophets and so they would not believe one returned from the dead.

Notice that the rich man asks that Lazarus be sent, both to him and later to his brothers. Lazarus is not seen as the person he is with full humanity. Lazarus in the rich man's eyes is still a servant, useful but not of particular importance.

And so the story ends. Jesus' subtle and not so subtle point to the Pharisees is that it is not who you are, strict keepers of the law. It is not what you have, wealth and position. The point is how we each choose to be in the world. The point is what we see when we look around us.

Recently I had an opportunity to visit the local food bank. I was struck by the system of food distribution that is employed. In many food banks, a grocery bag of food is prepared and the bags are handed out to people who come. The bags are basically the same for each person. It seems like a fair procedure, even a just one. Each person gets exactly the same things. The food bank here on the Island, functions differently. There is a point system, and each person who comes can actually "shop", taking those things which they need and want. This system does not treat each person exactly the same. This system really sees each person as individuals which the capacity to choose and to be responsible for those choices.

I do not intend to be critical of other ways of distributing food, rather I want to highlight this system as a way of truly seeing the people who come. There is dignity and choice in this system which is merciful in the best sense of the word. And that is a way of creating a bit of the kingdom of God here and now, both for the people who come and the people who serve.

In the tradition of parables and the stories Jesus told, I would like to leave you with an old English tale retold by Megan McKenna in her book "Parables, the Arrows of God".

Once upon a time there was a great forest. It ranged over hills for miles all the way to the western seas. One day one of the great standing trees, an oak, was having a conversation with an elegant, tall pine. As they often did, they talked about the other trees, life in the forest, the weather and all the news that the birds brought with them from the outside. Mostly the spoke of the other trees.

The oak mentioned the lovely, delicate azalea with its pink, soft white and lavender blooms. God certainly knew what God was doing when God made such a creature. Then the pine said, "And look at that rowan tree. Its shade and branches, its smell, and it so easily carved and made into beautiful things. Such a creation." They went through the trees one by one, and then the oak nearly spit out "And look at that ash tree. I just don't know why God created that tree. And there are so many of them! They seem to sprout up everywhere and endure hardily, but they really are rather useless. They burn quickly, and the wood is so soft that it can't be made into other things. It's such a shame there are so many of them."

Days later a woodsman came through the forest looking for a tree. He needed to make something. His house and workshop were falling to ruin. He spoke finally to the great trees, the oak and the pine, for in those days humans and trees and animals could still talk to one another. He asked their suggestions on what tree to choose. They conferred and quickly said, "Take the ash tree. There are so many of them."

And so he did. He copped the nearest ash tree down and went home. There he made an axe handle for his new blade and then returned to the forest and started swinging. One by one the trees were felled. Down they all went: the azaleas, the hardwoods, the rowans, the hickory. Finally, he drew near to the oak and the pine, and they realized rather late what was going to happen to them. The oak ruefully spoke his thoughts aloud to the pine and said, "Pine, we made a mistake. We forgot something basic in our quick giving away of the life of the ash tree. We are all trees at root, and the death of one means the death of all of us."

And with those words echoing in the air, the woodsman started on the trunk of the great oak with his new axe with its ash handle."

Stories draw us in and if they are very good stories startle us into new ways of seeing the world. They challenge us to see ourselves in the characters of the story and to see the results of actions. Stories point us to the kingdom of God in our midst touching our hearts and souls as well as our minds. The story of the rich man and Lazarus and the story of the trees just read, provoke the basic question of how we see the world and one another. Are we blind to what lies beyond ourselves, or do we see ourselves as part of a greater community, as part of heaven on earth?