

Pentecost 16C
Amos 6:1a, 4-7
1 Timothy 6:6-19
Luke 16:19-31
September 29, 2019
"Money Matters"

In 1987 I moved from the heart of the Midwest to the heart of Silicon Valley.

Not only was the geographical distance great.

So was the difference between these 2 areas of our country--
from the cornfields of Iowa to the high-tech world of Northern California.

Yet even within my new community itself, Palo Alto, there was a wide gap between one side of town and the other.

If you started driving east from the most western point, at Stanford U, you'd then pass the upscale Stanford shopping mall, followed by the many boutique clothing and coffee shops downtown, followed by a boulevard lined on either side with huge stately mansions.

But once you reached the freeway overpass, all of a sudden, all that conspicuous display of wealth came to an abrupt stop. And if you kept going, across the overpass, it was like entering a whole other world:

- Empty lots.
- Barred windows.
- Few businesses.
- A city in ruins.

The geographical distance between PA and East PA was minimal. But the chasm between them was monumental.

I thought of that disparity as I read the Gospel earlier this week. Although the two characters in Jesus' story are in close proximity, there is a huge chasm that separates them.

In his gated mansion the rich man dines at a banquet every single day. While just outside his doorstep, Lazarus can only wait and hope that a few scraps would be thrown his way.

In defense of the rich man (since my situation is much closer to his than to Lazarus), he can't be blamed for the fact that Lazarus is a beggar.

It's not his fault that he was born into a family of means, while others were born into poverty.

And at least he's not doing anything to harm Lazarus.

- He doesn't harass him for camping outside his door,
- or try to warehouse him with other homeless people somewhere else.

In fact he hardly even sees him!

Only the dogs seem to pay him any attention.

And why would he notice this beggar?

- They have nothing in common.
- They are worlds apart in class and status.
- Maybe even in God's eyes too.

For wasn't that what the religious leaders taught?

That wealth was a sign of God's blessing?

But if that was the case, the rich man certainly got a rude awakening when his and Lazarus' fortunes were reversed.

Now this is the point of the story that sometimes leads to simplistic morals. If the rich man ended up in hell, and Lazarus ended up in heaven, then if you're rich does that mean you won't get to heaven?

Except heaven here is described as being with Abraham.

And we know Abraham was a rich man himself.

Plus, when the rich man addresses him as Father Abraham, he responds by calling him his Child.

No, Jesus doesn't tell this story to give easy equations about who gets into heaven and who doesn't.

For this isn't really a story about the afterlife at all!

It's a story about this life.

The chasm the rich man experiences in the afterlife, only dramatizes the chasm he had created himself in this life.

Failing to even *see* a fellow human being day after day, right in front of him. Let alone show him *compassion* as someone worthy of respect and dignity.

The real reason Jesus tells this story, is to open our eyes to see how we're living right now.

To ask ourselves questions like:

- Why do I get up in the morning?
- What motivates my life?
- Who do I pay attention to—
- and who do I not even notice when they cross my path?

We, who have Moses and the prophets and even Jesus himself—risen from the dead—have all we need to convince us how to live, right now. And the way we truly live is by:

Trusting in the abundance of God's grace and mercy, above all else, not the fleeting abundance we try to create for ourselves.

The question then is, will we do it?

Jesus didn't tell this parable out of the blue.

It came on the heels of his previous words to the disciples:

“You cannot serve both God and Money.”

I was once told that our word money comes from the Latin word “moneo” which means “warn.”

Jesus is warning us that money can be a stumbling block to true life.

- Just as the prophet Amos warned those who had plenty, who lounged on their couches and drank wine from bowls, but were indifferent to the needs of the poor, the widow, the orphan.
- Just as Timothy warns the early church that “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.”

Right before I sat down to write my sermon this week I heard a new statistic: The gap in income inequality is now the highest it's been in 50 years. And here on our doorstep, right in front of us in the Treasure Valley, we now see the growing chasm between those who can afford housing and those who cannot.

Jesus warns about money because he knows the power it has to keep us from the life that really is life.

Theologian Barbara Brown Taylor put it this way:

“Jesus couldn’t stand the way people loved the things they could get for themselves, better than the way they loved the things God wanted to give them.

- They were satisfied with linen suits and sumptuous feasts, when God wanted to give them the kingdom.
- They were content to live in the world with beggars, when God wanted to give them brothers and sisters.
- They were happy to get by with the parts of the Bible that backed up their own ways of life, when God wanted to give them a new life altogether.

What they do not seem to know—what we still do not seem to know—is that we are the victims of our own way of life.

- When we succeed in cutting ourselves off from each other,
- when we learn how to live with the misery of other people by convincing ourselves that they deserve it,
- when we defend our own good fortunes as God’s blessing and decline to see how our lives are quilted together with all other lives, then we are the losers--

Not because of what God will do to us, but because of what we have done to ourselves.” (*Bread of Angels*, 1997, p.112)

Jesus came to bridge the gaps, to collapse the chasms we create between one another.

He is the Gate that opens us up to the one at our gate, knowing that when we reach out in compassion, it changes us as much as it changes another.

Our call is not to “help” someone below us.

Our call is to look each other in the eye as beloved children of God, trusting that “God is our help,” which is the meaning of Lazarus’ name.

As the old slogan puts it:

“If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time.

If you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

That is how we move from isolation to community.

That is how we move from hard-heartedness to compassion.

That is how we move from death to resurrection.

Discovering the life that really is life.

