

“barren women” vulnerable and without a future.

Maybe that woman knows that now, with her home in ruin, a victim of bad luck, she is in exactly in the right position where the God of Israel and the church will notice her plight and lifts her up. Perhaps that’s why, even in her bleak situation, she is moved to praise.

After the funeral of her beloved husband, she said to me, “I don’t think I’ll ever be able to come back to church again. It’s just all too sad.”

But in the succeeding days I urged her to return to church. Her church friends did too. I was so pleased on that Sunday in June when she was back at church, seated alone in the pew where she had always sat with her beloved husband.

I watched her. She was singing the hymns. She seemed almost to have a smile on her face at points doing the service.

As I greeted her at the door I praised her for being there. “I know this wasn’t easy,” I told her, “but I’m so glad that you took the plunge and came back to church.”

“I am too,” she said. “I loved that the first hymn was, ‘Joyful, Joyful.’ Fred loved that. I sat there, thinking about all the good memories we shared in that building—the children’s weddings, that Easter when I had to change all the lilies because the heat came on and wilted them. I praise God for all of it.”

Still in acute grief. Just three weeks after the funeral. This woman speaks of praising God?

You want a definition of a Christian? I’ll give you one, based upon Psalm 113. A Christian is simply someone who knows how to praise God. No, let me be more precise. A Christian is someone who knows how to praise the God we’ve got, the God who is Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, the God who not only created the world but who also told us God’s name, the God who is the Word who became flesh, the God who is the disruptive Holy Spirit.

And perhaps praise, even in difficult times, is not that difficult because perhaps God has created us for praise, has fashioned us for no greater reason than to praise the God who has given life to us.

Why do you come to church? You come to church (in the light of Psalm 113) to become who you were created to be, to learn how to praise God night and day, in sunshine and in rain, when we

receive good gifts or when we must face difficult loss.

I think, for instance, of when we gather here for a funeral. Say it’s a tough loss for us, a very sad death. But then I stand and announce the first hymn is “Now Thank We All Our God,” or “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling.” And you are a bit jolted by the choice of hymn. But you stand and sing anyway. You join your voice with those of your fellow congregants. And despite your feelings, despite the loss, you sing. You praise.

Who first prayed Psalm 113? And what was the actual situation of the psalmist? My first supposition was that the Psalmist was having a bright, sunny day when everything was going just fine and all was right with the world.

But then I read the psalm more closely, I attend to the specific circumstances that the psalmist notes, and I think again. The psalmist praises God for being “high over all the nations.” Perhaps the land of the psalmist was in a national crisis. Could his nation have been in turmoil due to bad human rulers? Perhaps his homeland was being threatened by another nation, but the psalmist remembers that God is above the nations, that no human ruler, no matter how bad or how powerful can ultimately thwart the purposes of God. Praise God who is better than the nations or their rulers!

“God lifts up the poor from the dirt and raises up the needy from the garbage pile,” sings the psalmist, noting that God is not generically good but good to those who are down on their luck, the powerless who have been victimized by the powerful. Because God is not only a God of love but a God of justice, the powerful oppressor will be judged, the powerless oppressed lifted up.

“God nests the once barren woman at home—now a joyful mother with children!” Childless, single women were among the most vulnerable in the psalmist’s society. Was the singer of Psalm 113 a woman who felt very vulnerable, very much alone, a woman whose future looked barren and bleak? For a once barren woman to remember who God is and what God has done could have prompted this outburst of pure, heartfelt, passionate praise.

Maybe deep remembrance ministering to deep need leads to great praise. Perhaps it in the most vulnerable, difficult times of life that we can be moved by the ministrations of the Holy Spirit in our lives and by the encouragement of our sisters and brothers here in the congregation to praise.

I bet there are people here this morning who know what it’s like to intend to come to church in order to lament, to whine, to protest, to count your many misfortunes only to be turned around—maybe during the singing of a hymn, or the reading of scripture, or the chanting of a psalm—into pure, surprising, unintended praise.

If our only hope, in times of trouble, is in ourselves and our actions, then we don’t have much to praise. However, if our hope from sunrise to sunset all the way into eternity is in the God who has a special love for the poor, the oppressed, the troubled, and the forlorn, then there’s good reason to sing a psalm of praise.

The world only knows how to praise when life is going well, when good things are happening. The church teaches us to praise even when things are not going well and especially then.

C.S. Lewis said that “joy is the serious business of heaven.” One day the joyful praise that we experience here in church on Sundays, in spite of ourselves and our situation at the moment, that joy will one day be for all eternity. We were created for praise. The church keeps training us how to praise. And one day we will praise forever.

*“Let the Lord’s name be blessed
from now until forever from now!”
Amen.*

Relating the text:

I remember Tony Campolo, the great evangelical activist, saying that our destiny in eternity is to join our voices in heaven’s great choir. “Read the Revelation,” said Tony. “The Bible ends with nothing but singing.”

Then he continued, “That means that church is one long, lifetime choir rehearsal. In church we are to learn to sing in such a way that in eternity we’ll know the right tune. We will join our different voices as one, and we shall raise the roof of heaven with our praise.”



September 29, 2019

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Amos 6:1a, 4-7

Psalm 146

1 Timothy 6:6-19

Luke 16:19-31

Selected reading:

Luke 16:19-31

Theme:

Jesus portrays the judgments of God upon the rich, particularly the rich who use their riches only for themselves and are oblivious to the plight of the poor. The rich have a responsibility to use their riches to alleviate some of the suffering of the poor. We will be judged on the basis of how we have used or abused our material blessings.

Introduction to the readings:

Amos 6:1a, 4-7

The prophet Amos condemns the comfort and self-satisfaction of the rich in Israel.

1 Timothy 6:6-19

Paul urges Timothy to live a life of righteousness and gives him instruction on caring for the congregation.

Luke 16:19-31

Jesus tells a parable of a rich man and a poor man named Lazarus.

Prayer:

Lord, we would like to be in church today focusing upon spiritual matters rather than upon material things. We would prefer dreamily to peer into eternity rather than to take a sober look at the way we live our lives right now, particularly to look at the way we spend our money.

Yet you are not content with what we imagine to be spiritual lives. You want it all. You do not rest content until you have all of us, including our money. In this time of worship, work in us your miraculous grace so that we might be moved from heavenly musings to earthly responsibilities, so that we might come to align our lives more completely according to your will. Amen.

Jesus Talks About Money

Encountering the text:

Life after death appears to be tethered to our use and abuse of material goods in our lives before death. The rich man is not given a name. Later interpreters called him Dives, which means “rich” in Latin. The poor man has a name—the only name given to anybody in any of Jesus’s parables—Lazarus, which comes from El-azar, “God has helped.”

Both the rich man and the poor man die, and both experience death as reversal of their earlier lives (16:19-23). The Rich Man suffers torment in Hades while Lazarus lies safe in Abraham’s bosom (16:23), and the justification offered in 16:25 is disconcerting for those of us who have received good things during our lifetimes. It is crystal clear that the fates of the rich man and the poor man are as radically different in the afterlife as they were in earthly life.

Poor Lazarus lies at the gate (the Greek suggests Lazarus has been “thrown” or “dumped” there; 16:20), giving the Rich Man an opportunity to intervene in the suffering of Lazarus if he had wanted to. Jesus draws sharp contrasts, definite binaries between the lives and the afterlives of these two men. After death Lazarus is carried to a place of honor beside Abraham, father of Israel (Luke 3:8; 13:28-29). The rich man wakes up in Hades, place of torment and eternal punishment (10:15).

The two men, who seem to have had no contact in life, begin a conversation after life (16:24-26). The rich man in Hades pleads with Abraham to send Lazarus to succor his torment, but Abraham refuses saying that their situations have changed. In life, Lazarus suffered bad things, and now it’s his turn to experience good things. Now Lazarus is comforted, but the rich man is in agony. Sorry, but a “great chasm” now exists between the two, a gap over which no one can pass.

The rich man then entreats Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his five brothers about their coming fate in Hades (16:27-31). Abraham responds that the brothers have Moses and the prophets but haven’t heeded their warnings. Dives pleads that his brothers will change if someone should come back to them from the dead. Abraham replies that if they haven’t listened to Moses and the prophets, not even someone rising from the dead will convince them.

The parable moves from a stark, contrasting portrayal of the fates of the rich and poor after life to a linkage between our ultimate fates and how we have treated the poor and suffering around us. One is reminded of Matthew’s parable of the Great Judgment in which treatment of the hungry and thirsty, strangers, the naked, the sick, and those in prison determines eternal fate (25:31-46).

This Sunday’s Gospel is actually rather typical of Luke’s attitude about money and possessions. In his first sermon, Jesus declares that he was sent “to preach good news to the poor” (4:18). Jesus advises his followers not only to invite their neighbors who can repay them, but to invite “the poor, crippled, lame, and blind” (14:13). Jesus describes the kingdom of God as a grand banquet where the invitation has been extended to “the poor, crippled, blind, and lame” (14:21).

Luke also tells us of the Widow’s Coin and the Prodigal in chapter 15 as well as the Dishonest Manager’s handling of debts in 16:1-13, all parables that deal with the issue of wealth. Luke characterizes the Pharisees as “money-lovers” (16:14). Though we have little evidence to suggest that wealth was a particular temptation for the Pharisees, it is interesting to note that Luke’s Jesus repeatedly calls into question wealth and the wealthy.

Jesus’s message of good news for the poor would be striking enough, but he



preaches quite different news for the rich. The rich young man asks Jesus how he can inherit eternal life only to have Jesus tell him to sell all he has and distribute the money to the poor. This prompts Jesus to remark that the rich have real difficulty entering the kingdom of God (18:18-30). A rich man whom the world might call prudent and successful, Jesus names as a fool (12:8-21). Possessions are to be sold and the wealth is to be distributed to the poor (12:33; 18:22). After Jesus proclaims that “salvation has come” to the house of rich Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector when he gives half of his possessions to the poor and repays anyone he has defrauded four times as much (19:1-10). In Luke’s second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, early Christians would “sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need” (Acts 2:45; 4:32-34).

We preachers who preach Jesus’s message in North America among people whose material prosperity is unprecedented in the history of the world wonder how to preach Jesus’s teachings on money and possessions, particularly in a culture which often sees riches as a sign of divine blessing rather than as a proxy for God’s coming wrath. Perhaps the parable helps us to see that our eternal fate is determined by how we use wealth to alleviate the suffering of others in this life.

Having been in the Gospel of Luke for this entire year, we, like the rich man’s five brothers, have been warned. Now, in this Sunday’s Gospel we are warned by a preacher who actually came back from the dead in order to tell us this parable.

Proclaiming the text:

And now for the sermon. You know sermons. That’s when we all stop whatever we are doing and dare to listen to what Jesus has to say to us. A sermon is when we stop talking about whatever’s on our minds and focus on what’s on God’s mind. A sermon is when we bend our lives toward scripture so that scripture might bend our lives toward God.

I’m saying all this because I can’t help but be just a tad defensive about this morning’s Gospel. The word “gospel” means “good news” but I doubt that I’m the only one in the congregation who hears some bad news in today’s Gospel lesson from Luke.

No way around it. Today’s Gospel is about...money. There, I’ve said it. Money.

“Money makes the world go around, the world go around, the world go around,

Money makes the...” sings the host in the musical Cabaret. We don’t talk as much about money in this church as the Bible talks about money. Today’s Gospel is one of hundreds (almost a thousand by one count) of places in scripture that money, riches, and material goods are discussed in a negative way.

[Read Luke 16:19-31]

It’s a parable of judgment, a disgusting description of the miserable plight of a poor man (“dogs would come and lick his sores” says verse 21) juxtaposed with a scathing picture of the extravagant, cushy lifestyle of an insensitive rich man who wears finery and feasts in luxury.

Then the story thrusts the rich man into hell where he is in horrible torment. The parable is a dire warning. Unlike most of Jesus’s parables, this one takes sides, refuses to be subtle, and draws the gap between rich and poor as a stark contrast. This story is “hellfire and damnation” preaching for sure.

Or is it? Is this story of Lazarus and the rich man good news or bad? You make the call.

Often I hear discussion of the gap between rich and poor, the growing gap. There have been differing, sometimes deeply conflicting proposals for how to uplift the poor economically and how to lessen that gap. Within our congregation I’m sure that there are folks who have very different ideas about economic and political matters and how best to solve the growing gap between rich and poor. Some believe government could do more; others believe government ought to do less and let the market more robustly run its course. Some say education is the answer; others say another revision of the tax code is the key to the problem.

As Christians we can hold deep disagreements with one another on these matters. Yet there can be no disagreement that Jesus takes sides, that Jesus has clearly set up the argument in such a way as to indicate that God is not mocked, that in the end God will work justice for the poor whether we do or not, that in the future there will be a price to be paid by those who have enjoyed life’s luxuries and blessedness at the expense of denying others basic human needs like food, housing, and health care (three of the necessities that were denied the poor man in Jesus’s story). Tell me if you can figure out any other way to interpret this little story from Jesus.

It’s become fashionable for our politicians to worry about the overburdened middle class. But who worries about the

poor? When we speak of the poor, we often speak in ways that suggest that their poverty is their own fault, that they are lazy and don’t want to work, that they have made bad choices and ought to pay for it. In Jesus’s story, it’s the rich who are lazy and don’t want to do any work, including good work, and the rich who make bad choices in life that they pay for in the afterlife.

I confess that most of my political opinions have their root in my assessment of what a candidate might do for me and my family. I’m told that most of our political opinions are more closely correlated with our income tax bracket than our religious beliefs and values. What is this candidate, if elected, going to do to protect me and what I’ve accumulated? How can that candidate help me get more of what I think I must have if I am to accumulate enough to make my life worth living?

But let’s be clear (and it seems to me this parable is very, very clear) that the Christian position is always concern for those who have less and a sense of judgment and a call to responsibility for those of us who have more. When I say that I’m not being a class warfare and political correctness, socialist-leaning, tax-and-spend liberal, I’m telling you that we can’t avoid thinking about the situations of the poor and the rich before God, if we listen to Jesus.

And yet, what I’m characterizing as bad news for most of us (because most of us are, by the wider world’s standards, rich) some of you may hear good news in Jesus’s story of the rich man in hell and the poor man’s embrace by Abraham. With whom do you most closely relate in the story? Sadly, most of us can identify more with the rich than with the poor. Life’s necessities have not been difficult for us to obtain. While we may not consider ourselves rich, we’ve lived with luxuries that many of our forebearers would have considered fit only for royalty. Like the rich man in the story, we have been privileged to be served food fit for a king, and we’ve worn some really nice threads in our day.

But even among us privileged there are some who can more closely relate to the poor man. You have known sickness in a world that worships health. You have known relative poverty in a world where people’s worth is judged by how much money they can accumulate. You have known emptiness and hunger in a culture where most are more likely to perish from too much than too little. Some of



you grew up having lots of stuff handed to you by your parents but watched your well-off parents make a mess of their marriage and preside over a sad family life—you know firsthand the limits of wealth. If you fit in any of these categories, then the story that seems harsh to so many of us may seem like good news to you.

And even for those of us who have known relative riches, there is some good news here. Our material blessings are indeed blessings. And yet, the story suggests that even God's blessings become our curses when they are abused to widen the gap between those of us who have more and those who have less. We are not created to be divided, separated from one another by the great chasm of the political right and the left, the rich and the poor. We are created, Christians believe, for communion. God means for us to take responsibility for one another, to reach out to sisters and brothers in need.

There is more good news here. It's too late for the rich man but it's not too late for us. There's no way for the rich man in Hades to warn his father and brothers. They wouldn't listen to the prophets, to scripture, and their time is up. But there is still time for him to warn us. Though Abraham doubts that the rich man's brothers will hear his warnings, there is still time for us to be different. In this service we have read from scripture, from the prophets. And maybe, if God has blessed us with God's presence today, we have had the One come back from the dead tell us what the future is like, the One who has come back from the dead to warn us whose side God is on and what the basis is of God's judgments. And having been warned by Jesus's pointed parable, maybe we can go forth and warn others.

I'm not talking secular politics, or even economics. I'm talking theology. The one who told this little story (that is so difficult to weasel out of) just hap-

pens to be God's Son, the Savior of the World, Jesus Christ.

Each of us, in our need or amid our blessings, can take an honest look at ourselves in the light of Jesus's story. Somebody has come back from the dead to tell us the truth about the future and to show us our true situation. Jesus loves us enough to show us the peril of our riches and also to give us something good to do with our wealth.

Good news. You know the truth. And there's still time for something to be done about it. In fact, in a moment as we pass the offering plate and as you give money for the needs of others who are not in your family, as you take responsibility for someone else's pain, you can respond to this tough little story in a positive way. You can say with your money, "I hear you. It's too late for the rich man. It's not too late for me."

What you put in the plate here in church is not the whole journey, but it's a good first step!

Relating the text:

Looking over our tax return, I hear Augustine preaching that "a rich man is either a thief or the son of a thief." Of all the people Jesus calls to "Follow me!" only one refused, and his refusal was due to money (Matthew 19:16-30).

Fledgling preachers, I tell my seminarians, must decide upfront how much money they require in order to preach the gospel without resentment toward Jesus. It is said that more good sermons have been deflated by the prospect of a five hundred dollar raise than by fear of an Inquisition. As John Wesley told early Methodists, it takes little talent to get money—look at the people who've got it—and it's a sign of a full dose of the Holy Spirit when the greedy become generous.

Looking ahead:

October 6, 2019

Luke 17:5-10

October 13, 2019

Psalm 111

October 20, 2019

Luke 18:1-8

October 27, 2019

Luke 18:9-14

November 3, 2019

Luke 19:1-10

November 10, 2019

Psalm 145:1-5, 17-21

November 17, 2019

Luke 21:5-19

November 24, 2019

Psalm 46

December 1, 2019

Matthew 24:36-44

December 8, 2019

Romans 15:4-13

December 15, 2019

Matthew 11:2-11

December 22, 2019

Matthew 1:18-25

December 29, 2019

Matthew 2:13-23

A word on worship series:

Advent is an opportunity to remind us that our actions in the world are not the only actions. Our work for good is not the only work being done. Our hope in life, in death, in any life beyond death, is not in ourselves and our earnest efforts but rather in the unceasing work of God. Our God not only loves us but, in love, is active for us.

Focus on the Gospel texts heavily during this season, to help us see how God has already been at work in Christ, and how Christ will come again to fulfill God's reign.