

The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost [Proper 21C/Lectioary 26]

Amos 6:1a, 4-7

Psalms 146

1 Timothy 6:6-19

LUKE 16:19-31

A Sermon for Every Sunday

Sometime about a year ago a house on my way to and home from church got painted pink. All the other houses along that street are plain-colored, ordinary-looking houses. That whole house, however, from the ground to the roof and every bit of siding and shudder and trim in between, is a bright pink. It is so pink that even I, someone who suffers from red-green colorblindness, can tell it stands out. My wife says it is a Pepto-Bismol shade of pink, just to give you a mental image. We happen to like it. It's just...different. Who knows? Maybe the person who lives there is a John Cougar Mellencamp fan.

The other day as I was driving that route I got to the next stoplight past that house and for some reason a question popped into my head: is that house still pink? And then I couldn't believe I had even asked myself that question because, after all, I had just driven past it. It was clearly painted to be noticed, to turn heads, and yet, after going right past it about nine or ten times each week, I had somehow managed to stop seeing it altogether. It had become just a part of the scenery, I suppose, part of my way to work. I hadn't necessarily chosen to ignore it, but my mind had moved on to other things. The really interesting thing is that later that day, on my way home, even after I had resolved to look at it, I passed the same house again and, once again, failed to notice if it had been re-painted or if it was still pink.

The parable that Jesus tells the Pharisees this morning, which has come to be known as the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, is about noticing things. It's about not passing by, over and over again, that which really should stand out, that which should really disturb and distract. It's kind of an extreme example, an embellished tale about two people and the drastic consequences that befall them after they die, but the message Jesus has for his listeners is there are certain pink houses smack in front of us and, believe it or not, it's awfully easy to let our minds be lulled into ignoring them.

We begin with a rich man. He dresses in the finest clothes available and he eats whatever he wants and however much he wants every single day. We would say he's in the 1%. In fact, he's the top 1% of the 1%. Then there's Lazarus, the bright pink house situated at the opening to his property. Right off the bat there is something noteworthy. No other character in any of Jesus' stories has a name. Not even the rich man has a name. Lazarus happens to mean, of all things, "God helps." He's the bottom 1%.

Jesus really piles on the details with Lazarus, and it's kind of gross. In the time before napkins, they say wealthy people used to use pieces of bread to wipe their mouths and then toss it to the floor. That's what Lazarus wants to eat. He doesn't get to, of course, but if he could just get one spit-covered piece of leftover bread with some half-chewed pieces of food on it he'd be satisfied.

And then there are the open wounds all over his skin. Every day, right there in front of the rich man's house, right where Lazarus' friends had laid him, the mangy street dogs come, almost like they expect him to die. The wounds on his skin are oozing with something they like to lick, and poor Lazarus is too weak and tired to shoo them away.

And that's Lazarus' day: lying at the rich man's gate, dreaming about scraps of slobbery bread while dogs lick his wounds. It's a really, really a sad sight. Except the rich man apparently doesn't see it. And if he does see it, he doesn't see it for what it is, or, I should say, he doesn't

see Lazarus for who he is. He is someone God helps. And therefore Lazarus is an opportunity for the rich man to practice compassion.

Of course, the real interesting action takes place after the two men die. Lazarus is whisked away by the angels to rock in the bosom of Abraham and the rich man goes down to Hades where he suffers in extreme heat, where it's, like, 95° with a heat index of 110°, and he didn't get to bring his water bottle. Suddenly, for the first time, the rich man sees Lazarus! He notices Lazarus, even though now he is far away. And he notices him because Lazarus has something that he wants. Abraham and the rich man go back and forth over this request for a little water droplet until finally the rich man thinks of someone else...his brothers, who are probably just as well-off as he was. Jesus' parable ends with an intriguing bit of foreshadowing. Those who are not able to notice from God's Word throughout all of history that God helps the downtrodden, that God desires mercy for the neighbor, that God looks on the lowly, are probably not going to understand God's essential life-giving character even should someone rise from the dead.

Jesus never intends for this parable to be a literal description of what happens to people when they die. And neither is Jesus trying to teach that only by doing good things can someone avoid Hades and get into heaven. Those are exaggerated, folklore-type features that Jesus has added in. They're in every parable Jesus tells, over-the-top elements that surprise and sometimes warn. Here Jesus has added them so that the Pharisees and anyone else who is listening may understand that a great reversal is taking place. With Jesus, the entire system of the world will be upended, turned upside down, and it is high time to notice the kinds of people God has decided to help, the kind of situations God has chosen to get involved in.

It just so happens that wealth, possessions, material things can blind us to that great reversal. And it's not just affluence that has that ability. Educational level, class, race, even technology can do the same. There was a piece in the *Washington Post* not long ago titled "Why Church Can Rescue Us from our Smartphones" which made excellent observations about how our constant desire to be connected through technology has actually, in many cases, "disconnected us from our sense of humanity and from one another."¹ All of these things—money, education, technology—are gifts from God but, allowed to run amok, can have a power over us, reinforcing our innate selfishness. They have the power to encase us in a type of privilege that prevents us from understanding what it's like from someone else's perspective.

As for the Pharisees, those in Jesus' day who are a bit infatuated with wealth, no one speaks with greater authority than Abraham. And Abraham reminds them that the whole gist of God's law and order is to practice compassion, to take care of the less fortunate. That is, to open our eyes and see the things that God sees and God helps. God sees the orphans and the widows, as the psalm appointed for today reminds us. God sees the stranger, the one who doesn't have a home, the one who doesn't belong. God notices those who are oppressed. God never, ever, drives by and gets to the next stoplight and wonders, "You know, did I just pass someone who the world seems to have forgotten? That house, where that family just lost a loved one, is it still there? Or that house, where someone's struggling with addiction and the shame it has brought them, is it still there?" In Jesus Christ of Nazareth, crucified for the world, God is driving around and stopping at all these Lazarus places—and making them his priority. It would be a shame for us to miss out on the great reversing, the first-shall-be-last-and-the-last-shall-be first-thing that is happening for real in his resurrection from the dead.

¹ "Why Church Can Rescue us From our Smartphones." *WashPost*. Russell Moore, Sept 21

Speaking of people like orphans and widows and noticing them, of being in tune to Christ's great reversal and jumping in to help, one day recently our Church council secretary received a special thank you note from Lutheran Family Services of Virginia, one of the local social service organizations we support. The email contained a link to a story about a 12-year-old boy named Jahem who had spent most of his life in the foster care system (and in hospitals) but who had recently been adopted by a family and given a forever home. The note, which our Council secretary shared with us, said this:

“Dear Matt,

I wanted to send you a link to this story and share with you how we used some of the donation money received from [your congregation]. This little boy has had multiple surgeries over the years for his medical needs and we finally found an adoptive family for him! Several years ago, [your congregation] also donated money for a special speaking device for this young man, as he is nonverbal. We used a portion of the donation money to throw him a huge adoption party and to buy some nice gifts for the family – including a picture of a family tree with all of their names on it. We are so very thankful for the support [your congregation] has provided us through the years.”

So, Jesus' parable reminds us we are on a journey of grace to see the ones God sees, to help the ones God helps, who are the ones first in line for the great big turnaround his creation is longing for. As we open up our eyes, as we receive God's Word, as we remember he has risen for us to have new life, we begin to see them, too. And when we have our eyes opened wide enough by the Lord of heaven and earth, we look around at the people in the news, the stories from around the world, the Jahems and Lazaruses and rich men and women who are right around the corner and we may even begin to realize, my goodness, this parable isn't such an exaggeration after all!

Thanks be to God!

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