

ARE YOU LISTENING?

**Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Towson Presbyterian Church
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Isaiah 11:1-9
Luke 16:19-31

TPC today for the first time is joining in the national observance of Children's Sabbath Weekend. If you are not familiar with Children's Sabbath, you should know that it is a multi-faith observance on the third weekend in October that celebrates children as sacred gifts of God.¹ It is a time for churches and synagogues and mosques and temples to renew and live out their commitment to care, protect, and advocate for all children everywhere.

Now you would think that advocating for children is one of those things like motherhood and apple pie—something that everyone can agree on. As followers of Jesus, we believe every child is a beloved child of God. Every child should come into the world loved and safe and nurtured by parents and a larger community that can and will provide for his or her physical and emotional and spiritual needs: clean water, food, shelter, medical care, educational opportunity, religious and moral values. We all want, for our children and for ourselves, the kind of world described in Isaiah's vision of the peaceable kingdom: where the spirit of wisdom and understanding and respect for the LORD prevails; where even the poor and the meek are raised up; where the lion no longer threatens the lamb; where there is no more hurting or destroying because the very goodness of the Lord is abroad in God's kingdom—on earth as it is in heaven—"as the waters cover the sea."²

The difficulty comes when we acknowledge that we are not yet there, that we are indeed not much closer to achieving that peaceable kingdom for all the children of our world today than the Israelites were when Isaiah proclaimed his vision more than 700 years before the birth of Christ. Because the question then logically arises: what are we to do about it? What would God have us do about it?

I was talking to a dear friend the other day about the presidential election. We agreed that despite all usual media nonsense that swirls around the candidates, the negative ads and emails, the posturing and "gotchas" of the debates, we voters are being presented with a real choice. Senators McCain and Obama have some honest, philosophical differences about how to tackle major issues facing our country. For example, is it better to trust government regulators or market forces when it comes to making good health care available to more people? Is a tax policy that places relatively

¹ It is supported by Catholic Charities U.S.A., the Islamic Society of North America, the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., the National Assembly of Bahá'ís in the U.S., the Sikh Council on Religion and Education, the Union for Reform Judaism, the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, and more than 200 other religious organizations and denominations, including the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

² Isaiah 11:1-9.

more of the overall burden on higher income earners and corporations *fairer* than a more regressive one, or is it essentially punitive of the most productive elements of society and indeed counter-productive because it discourages overall economic growth? These are matters about which reasonable people can disagree.

I mentioned to my friend that I tend to favor policies that err on side of the weakest members of society, even though I recognize that those policies may require me to pay more taxes. “But aren’t you bothered,” my friend said, “by the fact that a lot of the people who will benefit from your taxes have created their own problems and could really help themselves if they made the effort?” We talked about a mutual acquaintance of ours who is generously described as a ne’er-do-well. He grew up in a stable, loving family. The necessities of life were all provided, and a good many of the finer things as well. He has had every opportunity and yet he has squandered them all. He is self-indulgent and irresponsible and frankly now a burden on his family and society. Worst of all, he doesn’t seem to care. He is quite content to rely on his loved ones or society’s safety net to bail him out.

Why should we worry about someone like that? Why should we—to use the language of psychology—enable him?

Perhaps we shouldn’t. There are undoubtedly times when “no” is the right response to someone with his or her hand out. Yet I am persuaded that we Christians must be very careful indeed about adopting “let them help themselves” as our default posture toward those in need. For to do so involves supposing that the misfortune of people like that ne’er-do-well acquaintance—or the poor and needy in general—is no mistake, that it’s God’s punishment for their sins—known or unknown. And it invites the corollary conclusion that those of us who do have more, who do have lives that work (more or less) have that because God likes us better. In other words, you get what you deserve in this life. And if you happen to be a child born into the wrong kind of situation, well, the Bible says the sins of the father are visited upon the children to the third and fourth generation...³

That idea had great currency in Jesus’ time. We know the religious elite in the first century sometimes used passages of scripture to convince themselves that their wealth was a sign of God’s favor. “Deuteronomy 28[, for example,] promises fertility, prosperity, and victory in war to those who obey the Lord. Psalm 1 makes it very clear that the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish. [There were plenty of verses to suggest that] those who obeyed God were blessed with material rewards and those who did not were condemned to poverty[, as were, of course, their children]. So why should a person blessed by God interfere with the punishment God had arranged for those poor souls? The best thing was to leave well enough alone. Let the poor pick themselves up and dust themselves off. Let them try harder to do what was right, and God might smile upon them too. Meanwhile, the gap between rich and poor was not anyone’s fault. It was God’s doing and that, as they say, was that.

“[This way of reading the Bible has been called] ‘health and wealth theology’ and [the fact] that it is still around [is one of the reasons we observe the Children’s Sabbath].

³ Exodus 20:5.

Jesus could not stand [health and wealth theology. When he interpreted scripture, he focused on the parts that made it clear that—far from judging the poor—God identified with them. They were passages like ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land,’⁴ or ‘Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but those who are kind to the needy honor him.’⁵ Jesus concluded that to] walk past a beggar was to walk past God, and woe to the rich person who did.’⁶

And so Jesus told a parable that made precisely that point: the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man that we heard this morning. This is a story of an anonymous rich man and of a poor man whom Jesus actually names: Lazarus. In fact, this Lazarus (whose name means “God helps”) is the only person with a name in all of Jesus’ parables. Jesus dignifies Lazarus with a name even though he is poor and hungry, even though he gets more attention from the dogs who lick his sores than from the generic Rich Man. Lazarus in his evident need lies in plain sight as the rich man “dressed in purple and fine linen feast[s] sumptuously every day.” Every day. Daily. It’s the same word Jesus uses when he teaches us to pray for our bread every day, for our “daily” bread. And this encounter between rich man and poor man, between those feasting sumptuously and those hungering after even the rich ones’ scraps, goes on daily, as much today as in Jesus’ time.

When we hear Jesus’ story of the rich man and Lazarus, where do we see ourselves? The tale is spun around the curtains that wealth has drawn on the windows of the rich man so that he is unable to see the beggar at his gate. His flaw is not that he is mean or abusive or arrogant. He is simply blind. He cannot see. Only in the next life, when death has stripped him of his riches, is he able to see Lazarus, now secure at Abraham’s side.

Jesus warned repeatedly about the delusions that wealth brings. “No one can serve two masters,” he taught, “for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”⁷ We Americans are a rich people—even after the breath-taking decline in asset values we seen in recent months. We are five percent of the world’s population, yet we consume close to a third of global income.⁸ We take it for granted. Most of us would describe ourselves as “middle class.” Yet in the eyes of neighbors in so many corners of the world, we are filthy rich, every one of us.

Can we see the Lazarus at our gates? Throughout the Bible, the overriding evil of wealth consists in the way it so takes over people’s lives that it makes them deaf to the teachings of the law and the prophets and blind to the sufferings of neighbors. How well do we do—as individuals, as a church, as a nation—in providing justice and compassion for the weak? To free Lazarus from hunger, you provide food. To free him from disease, you provide doctors and medicine. To free him from the elements, you provide clothing

⁴ Deuteronomy 15:11.

⁵ Proverbs 14:31.

⁶ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Bread of Angels* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1997), 110-111.

⁷ Matthew 6:24.

⁸ World Watch Institute, “State of the World 2004: Consumption By the Numbers,” Press Release: January 24, 2004.

and shelter. To free him from ignorance and hopelessness and hate, you provide education and technology and capital.⁹ How well do we do?

“Mission” is one of those words we use a lot in the church. We like the sound of it. It has a positive connotation. When we talk about mission, we’re usually thinking of the church in action, *doing* good as opposed to talking about it or debating about how many angels fit on the head of the proverbial pin. That’s important. To be sure, we are saved by faith, not works; but it is also true, as James put it, that “faith without works is dead.”¹⁰ We need to walk the walk of our faith in the One who came to serve, not just talk the talk.

Can we see the Lazarus at our gates? We are reminded this morning of the millions of children in our country and around the world who are living in poverty and in circumstances that we would never wish on our own children or grandchildren. How well do we do justice and love kindness for these vulnerable ones? The point of asking these questions is not to make us feel guilty, just as the point of Jesus’ parable is not to make us feel guilty. The point of all the parables is “to tell us a truth we need to know in hopes that it will change our lives...[For by changing us—what matters to us, how we spend our money, who we empathize with, how we vote—God works to redeem the world.]

God wants to give us so much more, so much better, than we can get for ourselves. We are satisfied with linen suits and sumptuous feasts when God wants to give us the kingdom.

In this parable, Father Abraham will not let Lazarus come back from the grave to tell the rich man’s five brothers what God really wants of them.¹¹ “They have Moses and the prophets,” Abraham says, “they should listen to them...If they don’t listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone rises from the dead.”

Will we? Will we listen? As though our very lives depended on it?

Amen.

⁹ Brian P. Stoffregen, “Exegetical Notes on Luke 16:19-31,” Online at Crossmarks.com.

¹⁰ James 2:26.

¹¹ Cf. Taylor, 112.