

Sermon for the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
Pastor Rachel Young Binter
September 29, 2019

I am grateful to be asked to be your guest preacher today. And as a guest preacher, it would have been great to come and simply thank you for your partnership with Lutheran Campus Ministry. Thank you for bringing us breakfast for our students. Thank you for providing leaf compost for our gardens. Thank you for Matt Phillips' partnership in planning and hosting an interfaith dinner dialogue on campus. And thank you for the support of your Rector, Ian, who has been such an incredible colleague to me. I want to just be able to say Jesus loves you. Jesus loves college students. Namaste. Amen.

But then I looked at the assigned lectionary texts for today. In the Hebrew scripture we have Amos warning the rich of their doom. In the New Testament reading we have 1 Timothy's proclamation that the love of money is the root of evil and in the Gospel reading for this morning we hear Jesus telling the story of the rich man and Lazarus in which the rich man burns in hell.

It is not as bad as when I had to preach on the beheading of John the Baptist for my installation in one former congregation, which seemed a little foreboding, although gratefully, as you can see, I got through that call with my head still intact, but these are not easy passages to address. This is a hard word today.

But as a good Lutheran, I will try to find the grace in it...

And maybe the first grace today is that the Bible is so crystal clear about what is wrong with our world that we can't squirm our way out of it. That Jesus names the great chasm that has been fixed between the rich and poor in such a way that for a moment, can stop the spin and name the sin and actually see it. And grieve it. And acknowledge the toll it takes on society, and on real human lives, and on our own hearts.

Because the story of the rich man and Lazarus is not a story that speaks to the culture of ancient days, but it is still the story of life on earth. And our world does work very hard to spin that story in such a way that we can justify our own hardness of heart. My eldest child has introduced me to a podcast called "citations needed," which critically analyzes the way media coverage often avoids telling the whole truth in order to justify the way things are. In order to not confront what Jesus confronts. And last week one of the episodes we listened to was actually about the coverage of people who are homeless.

It began with an audio clip from a story run on a local news station in Florida about a local businessman who was taking on panhandlers. It is the story of a man named Ryan Bray, who was feeling bullied daily by panhandlers who were "too close for comfort." And in a typical lead to the story...the reporter assures us that "we won't believe what happened next." The news report then tells us about a panhandler named Alabama, who according to Ryan, had engaged in harassing behavior, kicking Ryan's car tire and threatening his family. The story goes on to say that Ryan had offered this man \$15 an hour to work in his yard, but the man had turned it down.

So as an honest, tax paying citizen, Ryan had decided to expose this man as a fraud, setting up shop next to him for 3 hours to shut down his ability to receive funds, holding up a sign next to him exposing him for harassment and fraud. “They want money,” we hear Ryan tell the news team and us, “they don’t want to work.” Meanwhile, the panhandler, who is now on camera, asks the news team to turn the cameras off. His language is rough and words are being bleeped out. It is clear who the good guy is in the moral battle between a hard working family man and a lazy panhandler.

Except, the citations needed podcasters now lets us know that there is a lot of information that never made it into the story.

Ryan, as it turns out, is only a businessman because he now works for his dad’s company after losing his brokerage license four times. He has been charged three different times with failing to pay banking clients hundreds of thousands of dollars. He was also brought to court for multiple claims that he had threatened the life of other employees at one of the banks in which he worked. Ryan, who unlike Alabama, can afford a lawyer, was able to get an innocent verdict on the death threats. But none of his background information made the story.

We also hear nothing about who Alabama is as a human being. What is his health status? His mental health status? Who are his family? What brought him to his place on the corner? What kind of services exist in this community to help him with his basic needs? And the reporter never questions why he might not want to get in a car with a man who he did not know and with whom he had had an altercation to do outdoor work on a day when the heat index was over 120 degrees. We learn nothing about who Alabama is, other than a man defeated and angry to have a camera turned on him as he is being humiliated by someone with so many more resources than he has.

And we also learn that the news station, “8 on your side” like so many media outlets, has a vested interest in telling the story the way it did and in rallying people to “take on” panhandlers at the upcoming city council meeting. Because 20-30% of the advertising revenue for news outlets in our country comes from real estate and the largest news outlets in our country also have huge investments in real estate in urban places. And the real estate industry is served by having the “infestation” of homeless people that threatens the values of their properties removed from the streets. Not through social service programs, but through rallying the community to increase policing and create laws that send them somewhere else.

So this is how we most often hear the story of poverty and wealth in our country. But Jesus tells a different story.

Jesus says, “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores.

But Jesus’ story, it is not the rich man, but Lazarus, who is declared the righteous one. It is the panhandler who is held in the bosom of Abraham and given a place of honor in the kingdom of

God. And the rich man, who doesn't even have a name, is sent away from God's presence for the hardness of his heart.

Word of God. Word of Life? I think so. Because not only do I want the Bible to tell me the truth about what is wrong, but I want it to do what this parable does and insist that I hear that there can be another way. I don't want to harden my heart any more, even if seeing things for how they really are is painful, but I want to repent and let my heart break open just as God's own heart was broken open for all of us. I want to listen to the law and the prophets and let them move me to stand up for what I know is right. I want to believe in the kingdom of God revealed by the one who came back from the dead. I want to trust that God's love set loose in this world through Jesus Christ can break down the walls that divide, dismantle the systems of power that keep Lazarus at the gate, and free every human being to the fullness of their God given life and that I can step into it and harness it for change. I want to be changed and this parable begs me to be changed. It begs us all to be changed. It begs the world to be changed. There is grace sometimes in a hard, hard word. Sometimes a hard word brings a life that really is life.

And there is grace in that fact that we are not alone in this work of change making. God calls us into community. God calls us into Lutheran Campus Ministry and St. Mark's and Lake Park and Zao Milwaukee and Plymouth UCC and All People's and places in our hands this revolutionary word that is made flesh in Jesus and shows us how to live as faithful citizens of the kingdom of God. God gives us strangers to pass the peace with so we might see the humanity in the stranger begging at the stop light. Christ gives us bread to eat and a cup to drink that makes us one with him and each other at a table where no one is greater than the other and everyone has enough so we can see what it would look like to create a society where all are cared for and people do not need to live in tents under our freeways. God gives us the whole story, so we can stand with Lazarus and Alabama and resist the powers that would strip them and us of our kinship in the kingdom of God.

If there is anything I want to teach my students as a campus pastor, it is that the word of God, even at its hardest moments, is a living, breathing, challenging, empowering, life-changing word that still has the power to set us and the world free. And everything we do in this holy space matters out there in the holy space of the world. Amen.