

Amos 6:1a, 4-7
Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16
1 Corinthians 1:10-18
Luke 16:19-31

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The Rev. Karen Haig

Choosing To See

Compared to almost everyone in the world, I have always been rich. Oh, not the purple linen kind of rich, but rich beyond what most people in the world could comprehend. I have always had a place to live. I have always had shoes. I have always had access to food. I have always had clean water. I have always been able to see a doctor when I needed one. But that said, there was a time in my life when I couldn't afford dental work and so my only choice was to have my sore and sick tooth pulled out. There were many months when feeding my small son healthy food required that I eat 19 cents a blue-box macaroni and cheese for my own dinner. There were times when I reviewed my budget spreadsheet every day to make sure there would be food on the table at the end of the month. And there was that most heartbreaking time when my little boy, a child who came into this world happy because he wants what he has rather than wanting what he doesn't, really, really wanted something. It was a motorcycle tricycle – something he called a mokie-cyckie – and he wanted it more than he had ever wanted anything. Or at least that's what it seemed like to me. I imagine his wanting was magnified in my mind because that mokie-cyckie was something I simply could not afford. And because he rarely asked for anything, not being able to give him that one thing he wanted, well, it just about broke my heart. But you know, when I explained to him that I was not going to be able to buy the much wanted mokie-cyckie, he said to me... it's ok mama. We are not rich of money but we are rich of love.

Whether it be love or money, I have always been rich.

When we hear a story like the story of Lazarus and the rich man, I think we are tempted to see it as a story of judgment. A story of what will happen to the self-absorbed rich people who don't pay attention to the poor people in this life, so they are condemned to burn in hell for all eternity. A story of good and bad, right and wrong, heaven and hell. And while it's easy to see how those interpretations come about, and it is certainly true that ignoring the suffering in the world is a terrible, terrible thing, I think there is so much more for us in this story.

Which person do you identify with? While we have surely known suffering, I cannot imagine that any of us have experienced the kind of life poor Lazarus had. And while there is great wealth among us, I don't know of anyone in this community who is so blatantly unconcerned with the suffering in the world that they would simply disregard someone at their doorstep. The choices are extreme, so it's hard to find our place. Until we remember that the rich man wanted to send Lazarus to his five brothers in order to warn them to change their ways, lest they come to the same tortuous end he had. I think that's our in. I think we're the brothers. The ones who are still alive and well, still enjoying our wonderfully blessed lives, and still able to use what we have to make a difference in the world.

Back in Jesus' day, people believed that the amount of money and material things they had was a reflection of God's favor and blessing. If you had a lot, it was because God had blessed you a lot. If you had little it was because God didn't bless you much. The "prosperity gospel" is nothing new. It's convenient thinking, when the suffering in the world is something we don't want to consider or is too much to bear. When we can simply say that it's God's will that some are rich and some are poor, or it's God's will that some are healthy and some are not, or that it's God's will that some can get the care they need and some cannot, we no longer have any responsibility for the ones who suffer. Or maybe we don't blame it on God, maybe we blame the ones who are suffering because they dropped out of school or got addicted to drugs or got pregnant before they were married. There is a great temptation to look for a reason to distinguish the person in the dire circumstances from ourselves, because when we do that, we don't have to consider the possibility of those dire circumstances visiting us. It's understandable. But it isn't helpful. Because as it turns out, the idea that terrible things happen for a reason or because they are God's will, is not a good idea. Not everything happens for a reason. What reason could there be that babies are starving or that children are abused? What reason could there be that people at Bible Study, or at a McDonald's family dinner are gunned down? There is no God-given reason for those sorts of things and they certainly aren't God's will. God's will is love. And anything that is not of love is not of God. God redeems every terrible thing, and turns everything in to love – that's what happened on the cross – but God's will is always love.

It was easy for the rich man not to love Lazarus, not to care for him or for his needs. He simply chose not to see him. He didn't have to actively hate Lazarus in order for Lazarus not to mar his sumptuous world. He only had to turn a blind eye. Because in refusing to see Lazarus, he dehumanized him and effectively made him disappear. In refusing to see Lazarus, he didn't have to worry about the responsibility that comes when compassion stirs in us, and we find that we need to actually do something to change unjust circumstances. The problem here isn't the money. The problem is the blindness the money tempts us with when it becomes the idol it so often becomes. And the only way to destroy an idol is to turn it on itself and use it for good. When money is used to make injustice visible rather than invisible, it becomes a tool for God's work in the world.

Like all parables, this story gives us glimpses into the Kingdom of God, into heaven on earth, into the eternal life that is now. When we hear this story, it's a bad idea to think of it as a description of what will happen to us in the afterlife if we don't behave in the here and now. Not because it doesn't matter how we behave in the here and now, but precisely because it does. This isn't a story about the afterlife, it's a story about life. Your life, my life, our life together in this unspeakably beautiful world where there is so very much suffering.

This is a story about the way we deal with wealth, but more importantly, it's a story about the way we deal with each other. If this story makes us uncomfortable, that's good. We don't often hear stories that are as vivid and convicting as this one is, but Luke shows us time and again that Jesus cared deeply for the poor and that we are to do the same. These stories are hard to hear, and still, we need to hear them. Not because we need to be reminded of what terrible sinners

we are, but because we need to recognize what happens when we take our beautiful and precious lives, or anyone else's beautiful and precious life, for granted. We need to recognize how impoverished we rich people can become when we stop looking, when we don't see God's goodness and grace and love all around us. Money doesn't make us bad people, but it certainly makes it easy for us to put a lot of distance between ourselves and the "other." And when we allow too much distance between ourselves and the "other," we go a little blind, we lose sight of each other, and I think we lose sight of God's love for all people, especially the ones who are hardest to look at.

I believe with all my heart that we live in a state of forgiveness and that no matter what we do, we cannot make God love us and we cannot make God not love us. Love is who God is. Love is what God does. But that doesn't take away our responsibility to see one another and to care for one another and to love one another. In fact, the only genuine response to God's unrelenting love for us, is for us to love in ever widening, radical and authentic ways.

The Kingdom of heaven is at hand. Eternal life is now. And we come most alive when we take our place in God's great story and participate in God's work in the world. God is working to overcome injustice and hatred and fear mongering and scarcity and there is a place in that work for each one of us. What do you see God doing in the world? Where are you already participating in God's good work? Where would you like to?

The bishops of our church have been gathered together in Detroit and Flint, Michigan, cities where they've seen much more of Lazarus than they've seen rich men dressed in purple. Together, they composed a pastoral letter for us, a letter that speaks to our collective life here and now. Bishop Rickel has asked that we make it available to our congregations, and because it is a beautiful response to our Gospel, I'll conclude by sharing it with you.

Greetings from Detroit, a city determined to be revived. Greetings also from the city of Flint, where we are reminded that the gift of water has for many of our brothers and sisters become contaminated.

Here we have been exhorted to set our sights beyond ourselves and to minister to the several nations where we serve and the wider world.

We lament the stark joylessness that marks our present time. We decry angry political rhetoric which rages while fissures widen within society along racial, economic, educational, religious, cultural and generational lines. We refuse to look away as poverty, cruelty and war force families to become migrants enduring statelessness and demonization. We renounce the gun violence and drug addiction that steal lives and crush souls while others succumb to fear and cynicism, abandoning any sense of neighborliness.

Yet, in all this, "we do not despair" (2 Cor. 4:8.). We remember that God in Christ entered our earthly neighborhood during a time of political volatility and economic inequality. To this current crisis we bring our faith in Jesus. By God's grace, we choose to see in this moment an urgent

opportunity to follow Jesus into our fractured neighborhoods, the nation and the world.

Every member of the church has been "called for a time such as this." (Esther 4:14) Let prophets tell the truth in love. Let reconcilers move boldly into places of division and disagreement. Let evangelists inspire us to tell the story of Jesus in new and compelling ways. Let leaders lead with courage and joy.

In the hope of the Resurrection let us all pray for God to work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish God's purposes on earth.

Amen