

Sermons at Christ Church

Lord, Make Me an Instrument of Your Peace.

Pentecost XVI

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In today's gospel story, Luke has Jesus talk about the invisible man in rebuke to the Pharisees who always pretended that they cared about others. There were two men, he said, a rich man who was clothed in purple-associated with royalty, and fine linen-luxurious fabric. He feasted sumptuously every day. He lived large-like the rich fool. The second man was poor Lazarus. He had nothing. He was so poorly clothed his sores were exposed for dogs to lick them. All he tried to do was to get the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table. Jesus adds that both men died. Lazarus went to heaven where he enjoyed the company of Abraham but the rich man went to hell where he was in torment. Scripture is silent on why Lazarus went to heaven or why the rich man went to hell.

But we know that anyone who heard Jesus would have pointed out the perceived error in Jesus's story. They would have assumed that Lazarus was the sinner whose situation was a result of punishment from God-remember Job? Conversely, the rich man who had so much would have been tagged the righteous man because what he had would have been considered as a sign of God's blessings upon him for being righteous.

I am afraid to say that for many of us do believe that to be poor, to be the Lazarus, is but the consequences of our actions. To be rich is a sign of God's blessing or the manifestation of your hard work. There are some who believe that their success is solely dependent on their effort and theirs alone, and so they dare not lift a finger in support of those who cannot lift themselves by their boot straps.

But what if I understand that whatever I possess, all that I have, including my own life, is a gift from God? What if I understand that being rich is to be rich in God? And being rich in God means possessing the heart, the conscience and the temperament to make visible those who have been made invisible because of war, poverty, illness and the like? Being rich in God makes you care for others.

I have heard it said that compassion is when you see dead bodies in a river and you decide to pick each one up and bury it. Justice is when you ask what caused the bodies to be in the river. Indifference is when you care less about those bodies in the river-and that was the attitude of the rich man towards Lazarus.

If I bring myself to see you, to acknowledge you, if you are visible to me, if I recognize your presence for whatever its worth, maybe, there will be no option but to look at you through the lens of my own sense of gratitude and thankfulness for life. But how do I show any sense of compassion if you are invisible to me? How do I speak on your behalf or advocate for you if I do not hear your cry for help? Lazarus, the invisible man-his is the only name mentioned in all the parables of Jesus, and it simply means 'God helps.' Yes, God helps. But God's help is only made tangible when you and I refuse to be indifferent, when we care about others to the extent that we choose to make them visible.

As I indicated earlier, the story continues with the death of both men. The rich man in hell and Lazarus in heaven. As far as we can tell, the rich man did not do anything evil to deserve hell nor did Lazarus do anything to be in heaven. Their different conditions in the afterlife does not suggest that the poor will go to heaven and the rich to hell.

The rich man went to hell solely because of his total disregard towards Lazarus. In our confession you will read something like, *by what we have done, and by what we have left undone*-those things we are supposed to do but did not do. God holds us accountable for the things we do and those we do not do.

In the Old Testament, the prophet Amos bemoaned the rich and prophesies that because of their indifference towards the poor, the widow, the hungry, the destitute and the orphan, because these were invisible to them, they will be the first to go into exile- they will suffer for not caring, for being indifferent.

There's a cliché "be mindful of the people you meet on your way up because it is the same people you meet on your way down." Here's a cynical variation: "I don't care who I meet on my way

up because I am not coming back down.” This variation reflects the attitude of the rich man who never thought he would ever need any help from the invisible Lazarus.

But while he was burning in hell, he saw Lazarus resting in Abraham’s bosom. That was the moment when the invisible became visible to him. Lazarus was now visible – visible to the extent that he could see him from a distance. Lazarus was now so visible that the rich man dared to call him by his name.

Recognizing the change in fortunes, he asked Abraham if he could send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool his burning tongue. Abraham responded that the chasm between them was such that Lazarus could not cross over nor could he cross over.

Just as much as the gate of the rich man separated him from Lazarus, so does the chasm separate him from Lazarus.

The rich man then asked for a favor, send someone to warn my five brothers so they would amend their ways and avoid the same torment. For the first time, the rich man felt something similar to love: compassion for his brothers. For the first time, he showed that he cared about others, for the first time compassion overcame indifference. What we now notice is a man who being transformed by his new experience wishes for something different for himself and for his five brothers.

If you and I are one of the five brothers on whose behalf the rich man pleads, Abraham’s response reiterates the fact that we also have a choice, we can choose to listen to the prophets who call upon us to resist the temptation to be indifferent or choose to make visible those who have been rendered invisible. We can choose to care for others or care less. We have the choice to hold up and celebrate compassion and care or be blinded by selfish greed, but we do not have the choice to undo in any new age what we did in the old.

The idea of choosing a path that often does not lend itself to a makeover reminds me of a poem by Robert Frost “*The Road Not Taken*.” This is a poem that reflects on the choices that life often throws at us and the fact that one decision leads to another, we often do not get a chance to unmake

a decision. Listen to Frost “Yet knowing how way leads on to way, I doubted if I should ever come back.” That is what father Abraham sought to remind the rich man. You don’t need someone to rise from the dead to convince you about compassion. Since we hardly get the chance to do it again, we should always be in the business of making it right the first time-making that choice that goes to affirm that we dare to make visible those who are not, that we dare to reject any form of indifference towards another person and that we care about the struggles that others are going through.

As I reflect on this idea of caring, indifference and invisibility, I remember when I graduated from high school, I had to go back to the school for my results. But the school wouldn’t give me my results because I owed some tuition. I traveled to my father’s executor for money to settle the debt. When I arrived at his home, he was sitting outside on his patio. When I narrated my story to him, he simply got up and walked into his living room and never came back out till the next morning. I sat outdoors on his patio through the night. I slept outdoors in the mosquito infested patio till the next morning. I never felt such humiliation in my life and never went back to that house again. Years later I understand that his wife divorced him because of that particular incident. She couldn’t believe that an uncle could treat a nephew like that. There was a part of her which understood what it meant to be treated as though you were visible-that someone sees you, that someone cares about you and what happens to you.

The cautionary tale is we shouldn’t be blinded by our own circumstance to the extent that we cannot bring ourselves to recognize the presence of Lazarus-the invisible among us.

If I cannot unmake my choices, then I cannot be indifferent to the experiences of others nor should they be invisible to me. The truly compassionate sees evil for what it is, acts against the evil it sees and speaks against that same evil-remember, visibility is also about validation. And the truly wise always errs on the side of compassion-that is the only way to make visible those who have been made invisible.

Amen.