

Proper 21, Year C: September 25, 2016

The Episcopal Church of St. Mary the Virgin, San Francisco, CA

Text: Luke 16:19-31

Title: What a wonderful world

This morning's Gospel is not for the faint of heart. Ostensibly, this is the story of a nameless rich man, and a poor man, Lazarus, a relatively common name, then, perhaps being used here as we would use Joe in the saying, "an average Joe."¹ This is the only parable of Jesus that uses a proper name, instead of speaking generally about "a man," "a father," "a master," or "a sower of seeds." Unlike so many places in our world, and in Jesus' world, where only people of tremendous privilege, at the top of our various social, economic, and political pecking orders, are known by name, while the vast majority of humanity, living in poverty and need, is faceless, nameless, and story-less, here, the humanity of the poor man is upheld and even highlighted.

As the story goes, the two men knew each other during their earthly lives. The rich man dressed in the finest designer labels and only ate locally-sourced, organic food prepared by Michelin-awarded chefs. Yet just outside his gated home, protected by state of the art security systems, lay this poor man, covered with sores, starving, desperate. Lazarus died and joined Abraham, while the rich man died and found himself in Hades. Tormented, he called to Abraham for help, naming him "Father" and begging for mercy. Abraham responds, perhaps with tenderness, "Child," and compares the suffering Lazarus endured in life and the suffering the rich man now endures. It is easy to assume a sort of simplistic justice here – *Lazarus suffered then, and now is at peace, but you indulged and so must suffer now* – but Abraham doesn't actually say that. Nowhere does Abraham say the rich man is being punished or has been condemned. The rich man then begs Abraham to send Lazarus to his brothers to warn him that such suffering might, somehow, be in store for them, but Abraham points out that they have *already* been given every teaching they need by the prophets.

The rich man protests that if someone goes to them from the dead it would mean more, it would somehow be different. It's clear that this has been a rather brutal eye-opening for the rich man. He suddenly sees things he couldn't, or wouldn't see, in his lifetime. But Abraham is unconvinced. "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

On first read, it can be hard to see the grace in this story. Where's the God who forgives all our sins? Who welcomes us home at our end? So it's important to remember that the end of *this parable* is not the end of *the story*: that in John's Gospel Jesus *does* raise Lazarus from the dead, and, moreover, that Jesus himself rises from the dead, destroying death, going to any and every length to wake people up, not only the rich man's five brothers but EVERYONE, to open our eyes while we still have life in us, to bring us salvation *right now*. And that, I think, is what this story is really about: insight which leads to right living; a perspective shift that changes everything.

¹ Though I treat these points differently here, I appreciate Bishop Marc Andrus' sermon shared at clergy conference last week for pointing out the commonness of Lazarus' name and the importance of the less privileged person being named in this parable.

The rich man was a child of Abraham. He knew the teachings of the prophets. And yet, day in, day out, he indulged his own desires while ignoring the needs of his brother at the gate, and it wasn't until this terrible, terrifying, experience that he could see how wrong he had been. How blind he had been. The story shocks us because it begs the question: where do our values and our actions diverge? How blind have we been?

Ironically, moments of deep and profound knowing often don't involve learning something *new*. Instead, they involve seeing what we already know, what we may already believe, *in a new way*. We call it "mystical" or "transcendent" when something ordinary and familiar suddenly looks different; when, out in nature, or in the wake of a great loss, or engrossed in a poem, or in the midst of terrible suffering, or on a run, or in conversation with a friend, or at the edge of death, the pieces of reality *already* in our grasp fit together, even briefly, in a way that opens us to the "hidden wholeness"² underlying everything.

Earlier this week, I spent some time at the Bishop's Ranch in beautiful Sonoma County, learning, praying, and playing with the clergy from this Diocese at our annual retreat. In one of our sessions, a retreat leader showed a youtube of Louis Armstrong singing, *What a Wonderful World*.

*I see trees of green,
red roses too.
I see them bloom,
for me and you.
And I think to myself,
what a wonderful world.*

*I see skies of blue,
And clouds of white.
The bright blessed day,
The dark sacred night.
And I think to myself,
What a wonderful world.*

Somehow, Armstrong paints a picture of a sacred, hopeful, wonderful world, by drawing our attention to the most ordinary, the most easily overlooked, aspects of life: the glory of nature, the miracle of growth, the vast sky above, the awesome cycling of day and night. I've always found this song a bit sappy, expressing a kind of Hallmark sentimentality. But hearing it while meditating on the parable we just heard, it struck me as profound. There's a profound quote from Oliver Wendell Holmes: "I would not give a fig for the simplicity this side of complexity, but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity." This song speaks to me, now, of the simplicity on the other side of complexity, because when we claim the miracle of the everyday, when we can say with our whole being, "what a wonderful world," the wisdom that comes from awe and humility empowers us to make ever bolder claims.

What a wonderful world.
We really can share with our brothers and sisters.
We really can receive from our brothers and sisters.

² This beautiful phrase comes from Quaker writer Parker Palmer.

We don't need to be so afraid, so self-consumed.
We have already been set free.
We already know how to live faithfully.
We are capable of love, of generosity, of compassion.

What do you already know, that if only you let yourself see it anew, would save you from so much suffering? Would open up eternity?

*The colors of the rainbow,
So pretty in the sky.
Are also on the faces,
Of people going by,
I see friends shaking hands.
Saying, "How do you do?"
They're really saying,
"I love you".*

*I hear babies cry,
I watch them grow,
They'll learn much more,
Than I'll ever know.
And I think to myself,
What a wonderful world.*

Amen.