**“Lazarus and the Rich Man” – Luke 16:19-21**

Good morning, my name is Emma Loane I’m your student pastor for the next eight months or so. This story from Luke hit me hard this week. And as I was thinking about it and the kinds of images it uses – that seemed less and less like Jesus’ regular parables – and much more like a ‘cautionary tale.’ A warning about how blind each of us can be to the world around us, the world that exists just beyond our front doors, or beyond the sheet metal and glass of our cars as we drive through the city. Now, in terms of what I thought my first sermon at St Andrew would be like, I was worried if this was going to be a little more heavy that I would have liked. In fact, I had an entirely different introduction to this right up until Friday. But, what kept popping up in head was an illustration that I remember a speaker using once at a youth ministry conference. You might have seen it before, but I couldn’t shake it this week. *Maybe, you’ll do it with me.* *[Lead people in doing the “move your finger in a clockwise direction” under your nose…then move it up to above your head. Hopefully, there’s some ‘knowing’ ah-s. The direction our finger is moving doesn’t change, but the position at which we’re looking at it does.]*

You see, what Jesus does in this story is change the **point of view**. He repositions his listeners on the other side of this earthly life. He gives them a new perspective, and invites us in 2019 to do the same. To survey the landscape of our lives, and consider our society from a different angle. Specifically, from the under-side. From the perspective of someone who is poor. And that’s uncomfortable. It was no doubt uncomfortable for those who heard the first time, as it is for us. Because as wide as the wealth gap was in 1st-century Palestine…report after report tells us that the economic disparities in the US today are no better, and by all accounts they’re widening with every year that goes by.

So, let’s look at Luke 16:19-31. It may not be as familiar to you as some of the other Gospel stories told by Jesus. And at first glance it seems like your standard role reversal story, where the poor become rich and the rich become poor.

The scene opens with a portrait of decadent wealth (16:19). Luke’s nameless rich man is well dressed, well fed, and wanting for nothing. The mention of him “feasting sumptuously every day” (16:19) would have likely been a slap in the face to the ordinary peasants, gathered around Jesus to listen. People for whom, feasting was only done occasionally and always in shared community festivals. The second character, in contrast to the rich man, has nothing *except* a name. “Lazarus” meaning “God is my help,” a foreshadowing of how this all will play out.

So, having established this setting of social disparity, a contrast between the life of the rich and the life of the poor. Jesus’s plot begins rather simply: both characters die. And what started as a scene of social separation is now intensified cosmically. It is said that, Rabbis sometimes told stories like this about the afterlife to emphasize the consequences of one’s current lifestyle …this wasn’t *always* meant to be interpreted literally of course, but, it was a way of teaching that captured people’s attention, and challenged the listener. The idea was to spark a new level of self-awareness, or new insight, and kick-start the process of stripping away layers of denial and self-justification that obscure our vision and prevent us from seeing the world *as it really is*. Particularly, how it *really is* for those who are poor. The way that Jesus tells this tale, is meant to jolt us, to give us “eyes that see” with a new clarity the reality of suffering and injustice that we tend to suppress, whether consciously or unconsciously.

So, we have our characters, Lazarus, the beggar is poor and the rich man is living in luxury. Both die and now the rich man is in a place of torment and the poor man is “far away” (16:23) in the comfort of the Great Ancestor, the Patriarch Abraham.

This is the point at which the story gets really interesting. Because despite his current situation, the rich man tries to appeal to Abraham to send Lazarus on a mercy errand – not once, but twice (16:24, 27). And although, it should be obvious at this point to each character, particularly to the rich man – how their lives on earth contributed to their exact positions right now. Remember, at least in the context of this story, a person is judged not based on beliefs or religious acts, but on economic status and how they respond towards those who occupy a disadvantaged economic position in society. Therefore, it should be abundantly clear to the rich man that circumstances have changes, and carrying on as if you are still the master, able to make requests and have them be obeyed, is no longer going to work. So, we get Abraham’s response in verse 25, *“Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony.”* Here Abraham reminds this rich man that since, in life, he abided by a social order that maintained radical disparity, he must also live by it in death, and learn about its truth from the other side.

There’s a kind of a restorative justice logic at work here: in the way a perpetuator may only comprehend the consequences of their actions by experiencing what it felt like from the victim’s perspective. But, just like in those cases, perpetrators sometimes resist the invitation to change perspective. To trade places. To “walk a mile in another’s shoes.” I want to hazard a guess to suggest that if invited to actually experience the suffering of those who live below the poverty line in this country – even for just a day, a week, or a month, we’d be resistant to. After all, how could any of our actions in life have led to someone else’s poverty. It doesn’t make sense. And so, we are quick to absolve ourselves, saying, “I didn’t know.” Or “that’s not what I intended”. But these knee-jerk, defensive reactions don’t just keep us blind another person’s perspective or experience in life, but at a much larger scale they may mean that we are totally oblivious the part we play in social, economic and cultural systems that consistently favor certain people over another.

Now, let’s just acknowledge up front that all of us have layers of advantage and disadvantage, of privilege and lack thereof. But, what this warning tale is helping us do today, is hold up a mirror to show us *the world as it really is*, particularly for those that are systematic marginalized in our society. Reality...as *we* perceive it, is NEVER the full picture. Becoming conscious of how, the way we live…even indirectly and unintentionally hurts others is deeply painful, but it also holds a profound promise. Allowing us to reorder our priorities, reorient ourselves to another’s point of view. And in doing so, we are slowly transformed into the likeness of Jesus, to be people who walk more humbly, more justly, and more mercifully through this world. So that we can be transformed into people who demand for tbe flourishing of others, and dismantle the system that contribute to their diminishing. And so, we move to the place of hope (*...as I’m sure you’re relieved...*)

This strange tale allows for, not just a clearing of the fog, but a substantial reorientation …perhaps we could use the word “repentance,” from the Greek, *μετάνοια* “to completely change one’s heart and mind and dedicate oneself to a new way of being.”

Now, to be clear, this is not a work that we do alone – in fact I’m not sure we’re actually equipped to do something this massive. *We need* our community of faith, we need to be willingly educated about our implicit biases. We need to be open to learning about white privilege, gender wage gaps, literacy inequality, discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, or country of origin, or body-differences, and *we desperately need God.* Because, when we are faced with the reality of *our* participation in injustice…we need hope that *change* is possible.

We need an interruption to our normal routines. A jolt. >> But, isn’t that what Jesus’ did over and over again. Jesus’ very incarnation was an interruption to business as usual. His invitation to those first disciples certainly was...and not a convenient one. Every act of healing, every confrontation with religious authorities, every miracle, parable, and every event through the last week of Jesus’ life was an interruption to the ‘normal’ workings of everyday.

I want to boldly suggest that God still desires to interrupt your ‘normality.’ Because divine interruptions jolt us into new insight. Jolt us, from our default points of view, to consider things from a different perspective. At a personal level certainly, but at every scale of existence...from the relationship you have with your yoga classmates at the gym to your local city council, from your weekly family shopping trip to trade agreements across the globe.

God is here, God is still speaking and God will continue to interrupt human history and human lives because God has envisioned a radically different way for us to live together compared to ways of this world. God’s Kingdom Way is entirely the opposite the Ways of Empire, the Ways of the Rich, the Ways of those with worldly authority. And instead of valuing power, possessions and prestige, God values people. Maybe you’ve heard this before: People are more important than things.

The Psalm in our Lectionary this week is Psalm 91 and verse 2 reads, “say to the LORD, ‘My refuge and my fortress’.”. The key word there is ‘refuge.’ This little word may slip our attention, but for the ancient psalmist, the word packed a powerful theological punch. It helps us grasp something about the divine-human relationship, which ought to be one of *dependence*. God-followers are to seek shelter and protection in God alone. And by logical extension, that means we ought not to seek refuge, protection, security, and comfort, in other things…like wealth. To have faith that God will come ‘through,’ God WILL bring about a new Kingdom reality where the poor are no longer forgotten. A Kingdom where people are more important than things. In fact, God IS at this moment in history bringing about such a Kingdom right now, in the city of Louisville.

Back to our story in Luke – because we’re almost at the punchline. After the rich man’s second request of Lazarus. This time he wants him to return from the dead to warn his five brothers to repent so that they would avoid the same fate as him, Abraham responds with this (in verse 31), *“If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”* Here it is, in the context of this story, resurrection isn’t *the* final source of hope…instead it is the establishment of God’s justice.

Scripture, according to Abraham in this story, is more than suffice to warn us of the dire consequences of depending on wealth rather than God.

Scripture, according to Abraham, more than adequately equips us to resist economic systems that keep people impoverished.

Scripture, according to Abraham, has already taught us how to live. How to take care of others. How to advocate for another’s well-being. Their human dignity, their living wage, their access to affordable health care, their right to due-process, their right to quality education, and healthy food to eat and a roof over their heads.

And according to Abraham, if one is not convinced of all of this on the bases on Scripture, he’s says – resurrecting someone from the dead won’t change your mind either.

So, that’s it.

This is a deeply concerning tale. A story that truly afflicts the comfortable and comforts the afflicted. My prayer for you this week is that it jolts you, as it jolted me. And that we become people willing to constantly have our perspectives challenged when faced with the experience of people who occupy minority identities and economic positions that our different from our own. So that we can better join with God in building a just and equitable Kingdom, that flips the script, that values humility, justice and mercy.

Let us pray,

Lord God, as we ask for the grace to hear this Word afresh. Help us, as we examine our hearts and minds. Guide us as we seek to root out everything that is not of you, and relies on anything but you. Put an end to our self-centeredness and our sense of entitlement. Give us strength to make tangible changes in the ways we live so that all people can flourish. In you name we pray,

Amen.