

Sermon: Pentecost 19

The Rev. Mike Wernick

September 25, 2016

Year C

Amos 6:1a,4-7

Psalm 146

1 Timothy 6:6-19

Luke 16:19-31

Who deserves a cool drink of water... did the rich man deserve that drink... why didn't Abraham comply... and have Lazarus run on over... with a wet finger that could certainly hold a drop or two... surely that would reduce his agony... and who deserves the crumbs that fall from a rich man's table... do I... do you... and who gets to decide...

On our trip last week... Joel and I had a chance to tour Biltmore... on the outskirts of Asheville, NC... and there was no agony on Christmas Eve 1895... when George Washington Vanderbilt spared no expense and opened his new home to friends and family... The country retreat he has spent so long planning and building... is marvelously decorated and full of festivity... it contains over four acres of floor space... and includes 35 bedrooms... 43 bathrooms... 65 fireplaces... and central heat... an elevator... a swimming pool... gymnasium... bowling alley... horse stables... a conservatory... and many of those rooms are filled to overflowing with almost priceless works of art... sculpture... tapestries... and ceramics... The house originally sat on 125,000 acres... that's 195 square miles... that's a square... with one side stretching almost from Holland, MI... to Port Huron, MI... can you even imagine...

The docent told us... Vanderbilt was generous... to a point... he paid his Asheville staff... much higher New York City wages... and later made several philanthropic gifts... but he was single when he bought the land and built his *chateau*... and after just a few years... his expression of homage to the Gilded Age... housed just three family members... and staff...

Amos sounds a warning... for those who are at ease... who feel secure... those who lie on beds of ivory... and who eat lambs from the flock... and calves from the stall... the

youngest and most vulnerable who are the hope of the future... those who drink wine from bowls... [you don't have to get refills quite so often that way...] and yet... they are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph... For Amos... "Joseph" is a portion of the people of Israel who are in serious trouble... they are neighbors... and there is a chasm between them... In our time... in the United States and most of the industrialized world... there are Josephs everywhere...

The author of 1 Timothy... sounds a warning about some things too... but what stands out for me... is that he does not say that *money is evil*... but that the *love of money is evil*... and it makes me wonder whether those who have much have too much... and those who have little have too little...

If the world could have been saved by successful living... it would have been tidied up long ago... but the vast majority of successful livers have always been ready enough to stuff life's losers into the garbage can of history... their program for turning earth back into Eden has consistently been to shun the sick... to lock the poor in ghettos... to disenfranchise those whose skin was the wrong color... and to exterminate those whose religion was inconvenient...

So how do we hear these warnings today... much of scripture contains eternal truth... Truth that is true in all times and in all places... I like to envision eternal Truth like a featureless sphere... and onto it we overlay the specific cultural and social reference points that make sense to us... we can access these truths more easily when they're framed in a modern context... so I want to read part of a commentary from Fr. Robert Capon's book... Kingdom, Grace, and Judgment... now this book was published in 2002... and so any similarity to actual persons... living or dead... is purely coincidental...

The poor man died... and was carried by the angels to the bosom of Abraham... the rich man... finally worn out himself... in spite of Brooks Brothers and French cooking... died

and was buried... from Sheol... where the accommodations are well below his accustomed standards... the rich man sees Abraham and Lazarus enjoying an intimate little chat... and he cries out for Abraham to have pity on him... and send Lazarus with a nice cool Campari and soda... to take the curse off the infernal heat... like the French Bourbons... the rich man has learned nothing and forgotten nothing... send Lazarus indeed! He still thinks of himself as a winner who by divine right can command lackeys like this beggar to fetch him drinks...

So Abraham carefully explains to him the realities of the situation... he has had a whole lifetime's worth of good things... while Lazarus was up to his eyebrows in misery... just in case he hasn't noticed... things have definitely been reversed... Score at the end of this last game: rich man: zero... Lazarus: 1,000... in addition... the rules of the league are such that... far from being able to demand overtime in which to even the score... he isn't even going to be allowed to punt...

Between us and you... Abraham tells him... there is a great gulf fixed... it's fourth down and ten million yards to go... I don't make the rules here... Abraham tells him... I just call the plays as I see them... the game is over...

The rich man however... never once having to take no for an answer in his whole life... never having been at a loss for some way of making a buck out of even the most unpromising situation... falls back on his winner's instincts... maybe Abraham will give him at least a brownie point if he does a *mitzvah*... and arranges to have Lazarus deliver a singing telegram to his five equally rich brothers... warning them about the possible disastrous consequences of their present investment programs...

Abraham though is unenthusiastic... having Lazarus *schlep* all over the Middle East ringing door bells is just another of the rich man's bossy "when you care enough... send a lackey" ideas... besides why should Abraham interrupt the resurrection *tête-à-tête* he's having... when none of the brothers will listen to advice anyway... Listen rich

man... he says... they've already had a whole Bible-full of telegrams... they should get them out of the trash can and try reading them...

But the rich man... not to be defeated... comes up with one last... desperate play... if he can't make a commercial buck... maybe he can make a spiritual one... Speaking of resurrection... he says to Abraham... you folks up there are missing out on a good thing... you send Lazarus to my brothers... and guaranteed you'll get results... this would not be your ordinary phone-it-in message... this would be an in-person-from-the-other-side-of-the-grave service... believe me the rich man says... I know how to impress a client...

So Abraham takes a deep breath and delivers the punchline of the parable... Look rich man he says... I'm going to tell you something... when we talk resurrection up here... we're not talking about some dumb corpse-revival scheme... in which the dead get up and go back to the same old life they had before... we're talking about a whole new order that actually works through death... loss... and failure... and in order to give people even a hint of that... the one thing we don't do... is send back revived corpses... the way we've got it worked out... even when the incarnate Word himself gets raised from the dead... he only hangs around for 40 days... then pffftt...

Because you know what would happen if we left him there... they've never in a million years get the idea... that resurrection was a new order they could get in touch with only by faith... only by trusting it... instead they'd figure it was just one more funny wrinkle in the grimy face of history... and they'd try to sell it as something that was merely interesting... as news... for crying out loud... if we left the risen Word on earth... they'd right away get him on Good Morning America... and then for all I know... there'd be movies and miniseries... they're dumb rich man... just like you...

So this is how it stands... your brothers have Moses and the prophets... and they will also get the risen and ascended Word... that's enough for anybody who is willing to

believe... but for people who are hanging around waiting to be convinced... [gives up]...
listen rich man... I'm sorry... but we've got a bad connection here... I'm hanging up...

The rich man called out across a chasm... the same kind of chasm which Lazarus experienced even as he sat right at the rich man's gates... there is no relationship across that chasm... to be seen... and heard... to have empathy... and to be at least willing to try to meet a need... is to be in relationship... and there are many Lazarus' in our cities... and across our nation... some of them have taken to standing at intersections... with cardboard signs... getting way too much sun for their own good... and I have sometimes acted as though the glass in my car windows... was a chasm... so I did not have to see... or be in relationship... with the person asking for alms...

What kind of other chasms do we experience in our lives... in our communities... in our politics... racial chasms... like those in Tulsa and Charlotte... religious chasms... health-care chasms... environmental chasms... and economic chasms... because when it comes down to it... it doesn't matter how much money we have in our bank accounts... or how we have come to this Table... when we stand or kneel here... we are all beggars... we are all asking for alms from God...

In God's time... in that *kairós*... that due season... that high time... in which the Incarnate Word mysteriously brings in the Kingdom... all of our times are indeed reconciled and restored in the eternal *now*... but in our time... in the *chrónos*... the sequential order of earthly events... of days... years... and centuries... the shipwreck of history drags on... and the only bridge... between the *now* in which our times are triumphantly in God's hand... and the *now* in which they are so disastrously in our own... is faith...

Like the servants in the parable of the wheat and the tares... and like the better-paid ones at Biltmore... we can only let the reconciliation and the wreckage grow together until the harvest... As much as I might like to... we just can't get rid of all of the weeds...

but in our time... we do what we can... to cross the divide... to bridge the chasm... we give others the food... and diapers... English lessons... and garden space they need... and we offer drinks of life-giving water... and food from this Table... and we do it without regard to the cost... almost like George Vanderbilt...

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