

Sermon: Luke 16:16-17,19-31, Amos 6:1-7 © Kate Heichler; Preached at Christ Church Wayside/La Plata
Who's On Our Doorstep? Pentecost 16, Year C; Sunday, September 29, 2019

Come, Holy Spirit – take these words and make them your Word, your word of life for your people. Amen.

Do we come to church to be roasted about our lifestyles?

Do we need old Amos, telling us to get off our couches of ivory and help the poor?

And do we need Jesus, telling us to share our wealth or we'll burn in hell?

Well, maybe they're not talking to us. They were talking to the rich people of their day.

We're not like that. We're just getting by, right? For most Americans, "getting by"

includes owning TVs, cars, a pretty good wardrobe. I have a lovely house, plenty of nice stuff and more I need. I make donations. I don't cheat people... knowingly.

But I participate in a society in which many poor people are routinely cheated, in which, as a white American, I benefit from networks of privilege that give me advantages unavailable to minorities. I may not be lying around on an ivory bed, but I can't say these readings don't apply to me.

When three of our readings on a Sunday play the same tune as they do today, we are reminded that God has been talking about this for a very long time!

The Bible spends very little ink on the subject of sexuality. When it talks about lifestyle issues, it's money, money, wealth, wealth: the prophets, the apostles, Jesus all say it.

The prophets still pound us – If Amos were here today, he might say to us:

"You, a nation with 5 percent of the world's population consume 85 percent of the earth's energy, vast amounts of natural and human resources.

"You spend billions of dollars on weight-loss programs, while whole nations starve."

Lazarus is sleeping on our doorstep, and we mostly step over him.

From the earliest days of Israel's life, the word came down from God:

"Take care of the poor, the widows and orphans among you, the strangers and aliens; Bring a tithe of all you gather into the Lord's storehouses."

We have stopped embracing the stranger and the alien; the cap on refugees allowed to enter the US has just been slashed to 18,000. 18,000, when there are 70 million refugees worldwide. No, we can't take them all, but most of us are here because our forebears needed the safe haven America was, and settled here.

We don't listen to the prophets, who warned of the corruption that comes with complacency and comfort: we are the most comfort-seeking society in history.

We surround ourselves with furniture, gadgets, labor-saving devices;

We climate-control our houses and buildings within a narrow spectrum.

We take billions of dollars in drugs to make sure we don't suffer from even moderate aches and pains; we medicate our children and ourselves, so we don't feel our feelings.

As a nation, we are so given over to materialism, to consumption,
that it is consuming us, body and soul.

We are overweight, under-nourished; over-worked, sleep-deprived, isolated, driven.
It's hard not to join the prophet's chorus of "Woe to you! And woe to me!"

How's that working for us? As Jesus knew, that doesn't work. As he said in the parable, if
knowing what we're supposed to do works, people would have needed to the prophets!
Or, as a friend would say, "If it were easy, everyone would be doing it."

If we were able to follow God's commandments and Jesus' teaching about wealth and
poverty, everyone would have enough, and no one would have too much.

But we all know there's a pretty big gap between how we live and how God would
have us live, between our wills and God's will. That gap is where sin breeds.

That gap is a chasm as wide as the one between heaven and hell in Jesus' story.

"Shoulds" and "oughts" can't, won't bridge that gap. Guilt doesn't get us very far with God.
The only way across that gap is Jesus, the one who did rise from the dead.

Jesus came inviting humanity into a deeper relationship with God through a deeper
relationship with himself. He is still inviting us into that relationship.

From that place of relationship with Christ, when we really open ourselves up
and let him love us, and feel that growth in our spirits, we are want to give.

When our relationship with Jesus is thriving, we can't help but want to give more.
But you can't get there from the outside in – you have to go from the inside out.

I've seen this happen at the two churches I've been a part of.

I spent 22 years at Grace Church in New York. I came there at a time when it was
just coming back to life after decades of decline.

What caused that revival was a decision by the rector to preach the Good News
of God's unmerited grace and love for us – over, and over, and over again.

That message, and a weekly Bible study, which was lively and open to people with
questions and doubts, brought many young people into the church.

Then the clergy started a prayer group to pray for the church – in ten years,
there were about 15 prayer groups, meeting on Wednesday nights after eucharist.

The energy was on growing people's faith, not on social programs.

But when the homelessness crisis hit New York, it was the people in prayer groups that
started the church's shelter for homeless men. It was the Wednesday night crowd
that helped send one of its members to Liberia during the civil war there.

We started to see Lazarus and help him up.

That time spent experiencing the love of God and exploring the Word of God
spilled over into mission.

You can't get there from the outside in – you have to go from the inside out.

I saw a similar story in my first parish after ordination. There was little energy going to outreach and almost no adult education going on in the parish.

Then we began to offer the Alpha course. As people went through Alpha, they became more intentional about their Christian lives.

They got used to praying together, they started to ask for more Bible study.

Suddenly there was more energy for outreach – and in a few short years we went from one monthly dinner for the homeless to more activity with our companion parish in a rough part of New Haven, to an annual mission trip to the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota, and then launching a school for children orphaned by AIDS in Western Kenya.

Suddenly, Christ Church Bethany became known: “Oh, you’re the church that is so active in outreach.” We started to see Lazarus and help him up.

It wasn’t out of guilt, and it wasn’t out of duty. It was because people’s faith was growing.

You can’t get there from the outside in – you have to go from the inside out.

I don’t want us to volunteer more, think of more projects we can do to help.

I want us to spend more time growing our relationship with God, getting to know Jesus.

What God asks is that we reconnect with him, that we put God first, that we trust him.

This is what St. Paul wrote to his colleague Timothy: *Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.*

That is what God desires for us – that we take hold of the life that is truly life.

Jesus says, *I AM the way, the truth and the life.* Jesus is where our truest life begins.

Jesus is the one who rose from the dead, and no, we won’t listen to him

if we don’t come to know him more intimately.

As we take him up on his invitation into relationship, as we each personally come to know him better – through prayer, study, worship, through our common life together – a couple of things happen which bridge that chasm.

First, in relationship with Jesus we come to see ourselves clearly.

We see where we’re stuck in sin, where we’re relying on our own strategies, on power and money and the things of this world, instead of on God.

Secondly, we begin to see other people clearly.

When we are alive in relationship with Jesus we start to see with his eyes.

We cannot pass by others and not see them.

But we can only release our grip on what we have if we first trust God.

And that's the third fruit of a relationship with Jesus: we begin to see God, to see God's work around us, to notice small miracles, to trust in the God who created heaven and earth, who created us and sustains our lives. We begin to invite God into our places of insecurity and anxiety; to talk to God throughout the day. We begin to live in love.

That is the ultimate fruit of our relationship with Jesus: love. Love cannot be contained. True love always increases, multiplies, spills over. God's love spilled over to create the universe, to create humankind for relationship. Christ's love spilled over to giving up his life to take on our death – and God's love in him was so great, it overcame the power of death itself. God's love in us spills over into our relationships, so that we start to see more and more people as a part of our lives, even if we've never met them.

God is calling us outward, to move out into our neighborhoods – to connect our neighbors with the love of God and each other we enjoy here. People in today's America feel increasingly alienated, isolated, craving community. Are they on our doorstep – we have community to offer, my friends. Our young people often feel alienated and alone, one reason they lack the resilience to withstand pressures and bullying and criticism. We've lost too many high school students to suicide. Are they on our doorstep?.

Our area is becoming home to many new families, who need a place to belong. We are drawing emigrees from all over – over 40 languages in our public schools. They are far from home, far from family, often unable to make a living at what they're highly trained and skilled at, having to do menial work, if they can find it. Many are traumatized, and feel lost and disconnected. Are they on our doorstep? Our region is full of people with gifts and resources who struggle with addiction and mental illness – diseases that isolate them. Are they on our doorstep? Charles County is full of retired people, not sure who they are anymore now that they don't have work to give them an identity. Many crave company, conversation, to have their gifts seen and needed. Charles County is full of young adults who don't have family and community roots – imagine what an “adopt a grandparent” outreach might look like in an older congregation.

Who do you see on your doorstep? On ours? Can we see Christ in them? God invites us to connect more deeply with Jesus, who is right here. And then, from the inside out, we'll start to connect with Lazarus wherever s/he is. *Amen.*