

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon Preached at St. Andrews Episcopal Church
Clinton, LA
25 September 2016

Luke 16:19-31

There is a famous poem by children's poet Shel Silverstein entitled "the Garden". According to the poem, there is a man by the name of "Ol' man Simon" who instead of fruits or vegetables has decided to plant a diamond and precious minerals garden. Old man Simon was very successful and very soon he began to harvest "Fruit of jewels all shinin' in the sun.... Sapphires and rubies on ivory vines, Grapes of jade... Pure gold corn... (and) amnythyst seeds." Even the weeds between the diamonds were "platinum weeds." Not to mention his "Opal nuts and gold pears... (his) ...silver taters, emerald tomaters, (and his) fresh plump coral melons hangin' in reach." Yet, despite his incredible garden, "Ol' man Simon, diggin' in his diamonds, stops and rests and dreams about one...real...peach."

We will return to "Ol' Simon" a bit later, for now, let me set the stage for today's Gospel. Last week Jesus was teaching his disciples while the Pharisees looked on. He finished telling his disciples the parable of the dishonest manager in verse 13, and then we read in verse 14, "The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed him". Jesus then turns his attention to these Pharisees and begins to teach them about true religion being a matter of the heart, about the law, and about divorce. He then tells them a parable that begins the same way as last week's parable, "There was a rich man..." I find it interesting that Jesus has given three consecutive parables that start the same way. "There was a rich man who had two sons... (Luke 15:11-32), "There was a rich man who had a manager... (Luke 16:1-8), and "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple..." (Luke 16:19-31). Perhaps Luke wants us to see a connection between these three "Rich Man" parables.

Whereas the first two "Rich Man" parables are talking about God's incredible love, compassion, and forgiveness for the wayward son and manager, I believe this third "Rich Man" parable is in fact talking about wealth and the proper use of it. This is the story of an incredibly wealthy man and a poor man by the name of Lazarus. We know the first man is very wealthy because he dresses in purple and we know that purple dye was extremely rare and very expensive. Purple was considered the color of royalty because only the royalty or the very wealthy could afford it. We also know that he "feasted sumptuously every day." Now, a good banquet from time to time is always fun, but this man had expensive banquets every day, which is an indication of his great wealth. We also know that he had a large house with a large courtyard and a gate.

Right outside that gate there was a poor beggar. And the contrasts between the two men could not be more pronounced: Whereas the rich man was covered in purple, Lazarus was covered in nothing but sores. Whereas the rich man reclined at his daily banquet and had foods of all types, colors and flavors, Lazarus longed for even the scraps falling from the wealthy man's table. Commentators tell us that one of the uses for bread at these lavished banquets was to clean the guests hands of the grease of meats or other foods. The bread would then be thrown to the dogs under the table. Lazarus, we are told, longed for these scraps of bread. Whereas the wealthy man had a great home, Lazarus was homeless and paralyzed. He had to be carried by others and placed at the gate every day. He was absolutely helpless to even scare the wild dogs away, and we are told that these dogs "would come and lick his sores". Whereas the wealthy man was considered to be "blessed by God" and "righteous" because of his wealth, Lazarus was unclean and "under God's curse" because of his illnesses. Finally, whereas the wealthy man was a person of great influence who enjoyed the company of those in high places, Lazarus was unseen, ignored, just another faceless beggar.

There was a great chasm between the wealthy man and Lazarus. A chasm that went beyond the distance between the banquet table and the gate outside the house. This chasm can best be described as a "chasm of remembrance". Let me explain. The verb "to remember" means to bring to mind or to think of something again. It also means to keep in your memory, to think of something or someone often. The wealthy man passed by Lazarus daily and yet he failed to see him. He failed to consider the poor man's needs. Lazarus was invisible to him. The beggar never came to his mind, he never remembered to help him, to talk to him, to invite him for some food, to provide a little shelter for him in bad weather. He failed to remember the poor man's humanity basically because he didn't care to remember. He failed to bring to mind the fact that this poor man was his neighbor, a neighbor who was in desperate need, a neighbor who was treated far worse than his own dogs. The two men were worlds apart because the wealthy man failed to keep in mind that he had a duty to care for those less fortunate than himself. He had a memory problem that was self-imposed. He did not remember the poor because he didn't care to remember them. He had other things in his mind.

Jesus continues with the story. The two men died and we see them on the other side of this life. We are told that Lazarus was carried by angels to Abraham's bosom. We are also told that even while the wealthy man's physical body was being buried with great honors, his soul was being tormented in Hades. In this reading, Hades is presented as the place of punishment, the everlasting destiny for those who have a memory problem of the type we just discussed. We are told that the wealthy man was tormented by flames. At some point, he looks up to heaven and sees Lazarus at Abraham's side. He exclaims, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in

water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.” Even in hell the man still sees Lazarus as a servant, as an inferior person, as someone whose only destiny is to serve the rich.

Abraham does not refute the fact that the man is one of his sons. He in fact responds, “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”. Not everyone who calls Abraham his father will inherit the kingdom of heaven. Or as Jesus himself puts it, “Not everyone who calls me Lord will enter the Kingdom of Heaven” (my paraphrase). Abraham responds by saying, “Remember!” Remember today what you failed to remember all your life. Remember that the poor is your neighbor and that you are bound to care for them. Remember that the poor have names and that they are loved by God. Remember that you will be held accountable for what you do with what God gives you. Abraham says, “Remember!” Could it be that hell is the place of hyper-awareness, the place where we are doomed to remember all our failures? Our lack of love, our selfishness, our inability to forgive others, our self-directed behaviors that alienate us from others and God, and our stubborn tendencies to act as though others don’t exist? Could it be that hell is the place of remembrance?

Abraham continues, “Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.” The place to fix the chasm that separates us from our brothers and sisters is here and now. There will be no opportunity to repair this chasm once we are gone. This is the time and the place when the disciples of Jesus Christ remember the words of the Master, “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me” (Matthew 25:35-36).

Going back to the story of “Ol’ Simon” with which we started this sermon, we can say that despite all his jewels and all his wealth, old Simon longed for real life. The indescribable joy of a real peach. We can not let wealth build a chasm of separation between us and real life. We can not insulate ourselves in our comfortable bubbles and pretend we don’t see the pain of the world. There are beggars at our gates outside of each of our homes. Some of them are spiritual beggars in need of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. Some of them are our neighbors in need of our help, our attention, our friendship, and our brotherly and sisterly love.

Today I encourage, indeed I challenge, all of us to remember. Remember the beggars in our life. Remember whose disciples we are. Amen!

For those reading this sermon on line, please see the referenced poem below:

The Garden

by Shel Silverstein

Ol' man Simon, planted a diamond,
Grew hisself a garden the likes of none.
Sprouts all growin', comin' up glowin',
Fruit of jewels all shinin' in the sun.
Colors of the rainbow,
See the sun and rain grow
Sapphires and rubies on ivory vines,
Grapes of jade, just
Ready for the squeezin' into green jade wine.
Pure gold corn there,
Blowin' in the warm air,
Ol' crow nibblin' on the amnythyst seeds.
In between the diamonds, ol' man Simon
Crawls about pullin' out platinum weeds.
Pink pearl berries,
All you can carry,
Put 'em in a bushel and
Haul 'em into town.
Up in the tree there's
Opal nuts and gold pears--
Hurry quick, grab a stick
And shake some down.
Take a silver tater,
Emerald tomater,
Fresh plump coral melons
Hangin' in reach.
Ol' man Simon,
Diggin' in his diamonds,
Stops and rests and dreams about
One...real...peach.