

03/26/2017 – Lent 4

“Compassion: Judgment as Liberation” © - Rev. Seth D. Jones

Scripture: Luke 16:19-31

Today is the 4th Sunday of Lent. Lent, as you may remember, is the time of repentance. Our Gospel parable today is very much a call to repentance. It is important to take a moment and reflect on just how important repentance is in our life of faith. Jesus' very first words in the Gospel of Mark are not explicitly words of love, peace, reconciliation. But this very first words are Good News. Mark 1:15 says, *Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’* Repent, for the kingdom of God has come near.

And so, in our parable, we are called to repentance. This is a difficult parable for one very simple reason – who Jesus is asking us to identify with. Who are we most like in the parable? There is who we want to be in the parable – Lazarus, or if we are so inclined, perhaps Father Abraham, the patriarch of faith – and then there is who we actually are. Jesus us wants us to identify with the Rich Man.

Jesus wants us to look at what we have done and what we have not done; our sins of omission and our sins of commission, as the traditional prayers of confession put it.

The Rich Man wants to be saved by Lazarus and asks for Lazarus to reach down and show him mercy. But Abraham, speaking on behalf of Lazarus, says, *“No, the chasm is now too wide.”* Then the Rich Man, realizing he won't be saved, asks that Lazarus step down and speak to his brothers. Again, Abraham speaks for Lazarus, and says, *“They have the prophets and Moses. If they do not listen to them, they certainly won't listen to someone rising from the dead.”* This whole exchange is rich with allusions and foreshadowing.

The mistake we would make here is getting hung up on how to get to heaven and how people end up in what is called Hell, and what I call being separated from the love of God. Those are important concerns, but I don't think they are the focus of today's reading. Today, we are looking at God's judgment and how it relates to our everyday lives.

There is a relationship between the Rich Man and Lazarus and it appears to have been a long-standing relationship. It is a relationship that is defined by its *attitude of distance*.

Lazarus, who is sick, hungry, and clearly suffering, attempts regularly to reach across the distance, and the Rich Man enters his fabulous home and eats his exceptional feast and ignores Lazarus suffering at his gate. At their respective deaths, Lazarus is liberated from his suffering, and the Rich Man stands judged for his lack of help.

Throughout Scripture, we see this dynamic of God judging while at the same time liberating. This is a clue to us about how God's judgment functions in our spiritual lives. Judgment is always for the sake of others; judgment always liberates someone. Think of God's judgment against Egypt and Pharaoh in the book of Exodus. Rather than focusing on the violence of the plagues, for instance, perhaps it is an object example of how hard it is to liberate people from slavery, suffering, oppression. God's judgment against Egypt is to liberate the Hebrew people. Think of the Prophets. The judgment God brings to Israel and her neighbors is always to liberate those who are suffering under the yoke of tyranny, idolatry, and neglect. Almost always it is for the sake of those who suffer most – widows, orphans, and people like Lazarus. Or think of Mother Mary. She says in the Magnificat, in Luke 2,

*“for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.”*

Do you hear the judgment and the liberation happening at the same time in her psalm of praise? The proud are scattered, the powerful are brought down, the lowly are lifted up, the hungry are fed, and the rich sent away empty. These are all referencing systems of suffering as much as individual acts.

It is those systems of sin and brokenness that this parable points us toward. All of us here today share what the Rich Man has. We are more like him than we are like Lazarus. And this is true because we are Americans. This is also why this parable makes us very uncomfortable. God doesn't have to judge us, because we judge ourselves in relation to this parable. But what we perceive as judgment is, remember, always liberation for others.

Guilt and continual self-judgment allows us to maintain what the Rich Man maintained his entire life – an *attitude of distance*. Take that in: guilt and self-judgment maintain the attitude of distance that allow systems of suffering to stay in place. The Rich Man only had to do one thing and the only difficult thing about what he had to do was to bridge the chasm between himself and the one who was suffering. Now? The Rich Man must live with a constant reminder of what he would not overcome – the distance between himself and those who suffer.

So how do we overcome the chasm, how do we overcome the attitude of distance?

Notice what our parable is showing us. It is clear the Rich Man is participating in a destructive attitude and worldview, one that allows him to distance himself from those in need and suffering. Also, notice that, in the liberation of the one who suffers, he is named – Lazarus. He also has an advocate – Father Abraham. Heaven knows the name of those who suffer and speaks on their behalf. This is how we build the bridge over the chasm.

When Kate and I were on the cruise, we noticed almost from the moment we got on the ship how hard the staff worked. Along with that, we noticed how few people thanked them for their work. And so, we – Kate and I, and the couple we were with – decided to make gratitude the mission of our trip.

(Really, as you have probably guessed, this mission was motivated primarily by Kate). We made a deliberate effort to bridge the gap between the passengers and the staff. Almost immediately, it made a difference. When we noticed them, they noticed us. Within three days, many of them knew us by name. On the fourth day, Ruben, the head maître d' for the complimentary restaurants, knew me by name and stopped me in the hall to talk with me and thank Kate and I for our graciousness. We learned the names of several room stewards, some of the guest service staff, a couple photographers and musicians, our waiters and the staff in the buffets. It made the trip great.

We overcome that chasm, then, that attitude of distance, by doing what Father Abraham does – by becoming an ally of the impoverished and the suffering, by actively seeking the liberation of those for whom God stands. Micah 6 puts it simply. “He has told you, O mortal, what is good;

and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?”

We can only do this if we become allies with those who suffer oppression from systems of oppression, economies of scarcity, political and personal distancing from the needs

of those who are unable to speak for themselves or do not have a voice or representation.

Once we decide to become an ally, and I hope we do because that is what Jesus does, many concerns fall away. Now, we are no longer in a political firefight, or a policy deadlock, or a hardline over doctrine. Now, we are an advocate of a living breathing person who is no longer a stranger. Now, we have compassion, empathy, for the needs of another.

So, very quickly, here are 7 steps to becoming an ally. These are my own, but they are heavily influenced by several people, particularly Science Mike, Mike McHargue, who has a podcast called “The Liturgists”.

1. *Remember!* Remember that God’s judgment against always liberates for. As yourself, do I want to be on the side of God’s liberation? If not, remember that the Rich Man is not judged by God, but by his own inaction. The mirror God and Christ hold up to us is the judgment or liberation we see in our souls. So first, and foremost, we cannot liberate others unless we are also seeking to liberate ourselves.
2. *Notice!* The phrase for this that the kids use today is “Check your privilege”. Notice how you are participating in systems that foster economic oppression, racism, sexism. Notice your own attitudes of distancing. Since all of us in this room today are mostly white, and all of us live in the whitest state in the union, and all of us have benefited from that, we are, just by who we are, participating in a system of oppression. In order to be an ally, we must always be checking ourselves by asking, *Who am I here? What actions am I participating in that continue oppression and what actions are liberating others? What am I doing?* Because the simple fact of the matter is that most of us in America are the Rich Man in our parable today.
3. *Learn! And Listen!* Read up on what it means to be black, Latino, Asian, Roma, a woman, gay or lesbian, in our culture today. You don’t even have to agree with what is said, but it helps. All we are doing in this step is understanding that other people’s experience is not our experience, and if we care to be an ally to Lazarus like Father Abraham, then we need to understand how other people live and experience the world. So set aside your views and politics and just try to see the world from another perspective.
4. *Know! And Listen!* Part of the problem with living in Maine is our exposure to people not like us is very limited. But people not like us are here. We are the ones who must make the effort to bridge the chasm and seek out those who are not like us. When we do so, it is not to express our views and what we think ‘they’ need

from us. Our bridging the gap and knowing others not like us is to listen to his or her story, to find out what their lives are like, to know them.

5. *Talk! And Listen!* After we have remembered that liberation is God's goal and therefore ours, and we have noticed that we are living in a bubble of thinking and need to get out of it, and we have begun reading and learning about other ways of seeing the world, and we have gotten to know some people not like us, now we can begin to have a conversation with the ones with whom we seek to ally ourselves. I find that the best way to have a conversation is to treat it like an informational interview. I ask a lot of questions, and I have studied how to ask questions in a way that are not judgmental or forcing my own worldview. This can be intimidating sometimes, but I have also worked on overcoming that as well.
6. *Translate what you have learned to your tribe.* The problem we are running into in our culture is on the one hand, not understanding we are tribal creatures. We are most comfortable with people like us, and we form groups, clans, tribes, that share those concerns we share. This is not all bad, but if we do not understand this, we will continually argue over the top of each other. And so if you, choosing to be an ally, step outside your tribe, you must expect some resistance from your tribe. And so there are two things about being a translator:
 - a. *First*, as an outsider to the worldview of the one with whom you are allying with, it is not your job to bring the concerns of your tribe to the one who is being oppressed. Your job is to listen and learn.
 - b. *Second*, it is not the oppressed person's job to communicate to your tribe their concerns. That is your job as the ally, in the same way Father Abraham communicated to the Rich Man on behalf of Lazarus.
 - c. And so in this way, you become a translator between your newly found friends who are not like you, and the tribe with whom you are so familiar. You communicate the concerns and issues in words your tribe can understand, because they will understand if it comes from someone like them.
7. *Pray!* Pray that the Holy Spirit will open opportunities for you to notice the one suffering at the gates of our homes and our villages. Pray that we might become enactors of the love of Christ in material and empowering ways. Pray that we might become liberators like God liberates, sharing in the same worldview that the Mother of Jesus had. Pray that, like Father Abraham, we might have the strength to speak for those who cannot or will not speak for themselves.

Amen!