



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL
CHURCH UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
Stockbridge, Massachusetts

Seeing and Believing

September 29, 2019

SCRIPTURE: Luke 16:19-31

¹⁹“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. ²²The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴He called out, ‘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.’ ²⁵But Abraham said, ‘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. ²⁶Besides 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.’ ²⁷He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house— ²⁸for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ ²⁹Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ ³⁰He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ ³¹He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

SERMON:

There are some phrases in the Bible that carry extra weight. They’re attached to stories that grab our attention. One such story unfolds in the upper room shortly after Jesus has been resurrected. There the disciples have gathered, there the disciples one by one have come to look at Jesus Christ, to look at his hands and his side, and to recognize that he has indeed been raised from the dead. And then of course the one disciple who was not there at the beginning, Thomas the one who joins them later, the one we have labeled Doubting Thomas for all the wrong reasons, he comes in and he says just like all the rest of them, “Show me, show me your hands and your side, that I might believe.” And do you remember what Jesus said? He said, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.” It is the standard definition of faith, this idea of not seeing something, of not having something proved to us, and nonetheless believing in it, giving our life force to it, following it even at the risk of our reputation, or even our life itself. Blessed are those, Jesus said, who have not seen and yet believe.

In some ways, though, this story is the flip of that message, and it is no less important. You see, if you read the Bible, you will find everywhere from Isaiah to Jeremiah, from Ezekiel to Matthew, from Acts to Romans, this same phrase over and over and over again, and that is that God is looking for people with eyes to see and with ears to hear. For sometimes in this world of ours, it is seeing that leads us to believing, it is hearing that reminds us why we need to see, and that is what we hear in this story of the rich man and Lazarus. You will notice in this story that the two of them don't seem to know each other at all. You will notice that they have no interactions, you will notice they share only one thing, and that is they both will do the same thing that all the rest of us will do. In this story, they die. And that is where their paths cross. If you will notice, the rich man was never antagonistic toward Lazarus, that's not the point. He did not oppress him so much as he didn't see him every day. As the rich man dressed in his fine purple robes, as he feasted on his sumptuous feast, there at the gates to his house -- the gate presumably meant to keep people just like Lazarus out -- there Lazarus would lay, so hungry he could barely move, so hungry he was willing to eat any scrap that fell on the ground, so weak that he didn't even bother trying to shoo the dogs away when at least they came to try to comfort his sores. No, there is no indication here that the rich man was out to get Lazarus. Instead, the great sin that we see in this passage is that the rich man doesn't seem to see him at all. Why is it that he doesn't even notice this man who is at his gate every single day, the man who the dogs notice, who everyone else notices, why is it that the rich man doesn't see him?

I think that this parable, this thing that is designed to defy our logic, that is designed to defy us neatly tying it up, this parable goes on to say that the rich man also stopped hearing. He had long since forgotten this idea that the prophets had taught about for millennia, that is that our job is to do justice, that is not just to avoid not hurting someone else, but rather to look for anyone who needs a hand up, to look for anyone who is hungry, anyone who is oppressed, anyone who is in need, to enact justice, to do justice is not just to not do injustice, but instead to actively right the wrongs that the world has perpetrated.

You'll notice to the rich man's credit that when he finally notices Lazarus, when he has descended to Hades and Lazarus is up there in the bosom of Abraham, oh he remembers justice then. He sites tenets of the Bible that say that when someone is in pain and suffering that the rest of us should go to that person even if it's with something as small as a finger dipped in water to quench thirst. Oh, it is not that the rich man doesn't know what justice is, he has just forgotten that he too is called to do it. And what Abraham points out to him is that he has been told that message of justice over and over and over again, maybe so many times that it, like so many other things, has just receded to the back of his consciousness.

I sometimes wonder about us out here in the beautiful Berkshires. On Friday night, John and Jake and I had the chance to go up to Balderdash Cellars on the Richmond/Pittsfield line to celebrate someone's birthday. If you haven't been there, it's stunning. It overlooks the best of nature. It looks over a pond and towards Mount Greylock. It was a place where there was joy and abundance and feasting, and all that is good because Christ said I came to give life in abundance. And yet sometimes I think that in this beautiful haven of ours, this picture perfect place where people flock to come and see, that sometimes the people like Lazarus can seem so far away that we don't notice them at all. Sometimes in the midst of this paradise of creation, we fail to listen to the prophetic calls echoing from all around the world about what is

happening to creation. Not that we have an evil mind about it, not that we are out to get anyone or persecute anyone.

I just wonder sometimes if we fail to remember those who right now are suffering from climate change that is already a catastrophe over much of the planet. These last few weeks, climate has been much in our attention. And there were the young who refused to be silenced. If you saw one of those powerful speeches ever given, you'll remember a 16-year-old girl standing in a place usually reserved for presidents and leaders, uttering the words, "How dare you?" And those words were not just uttered to them, they were uttered to the whole world, to you and me, too. "How dare you?" And since then, there have been those who have praised her and those who have ridiculed her. But before we jump too quickly to judge, let's remember Jesus says "What you do to the least of these, to these children of ours, you do to me." She reminded us of an essential truth, that to do justice is to restore her future. It is not enough to simply not perpetuate a future that might be bad, it is to actively to respond to restore her future. In those marches that broke out across the world, they estimate that over 7 million people took to the streets to argue the same thing. And sometimes I worry whether I -- sometimes I worry whether we -- even notice, or even see what is unfolding.

What happened in New York after those big demonstrations, though, was something quite fascinating. There was a summit that was held at New York City's 92nd Street YMCA. And there was a summit held about sustainability, and about the social good. It was a Social Good Summit. But who was speaking at that summit is just as important as what they said. There weren't scientists, there weren't politicians, there weren't people of industry. Instead there were people from indigenous places all over the world. Because what has become clear is that indigenous people, those people who still live in traditional ways, those people who are still most connected to the earth, they see things that we never see. One woman who stood up was from northern California. She is part of the Yurok tribe. And what she stood up to say was that every day she goes down to the river, as she has done for decades. And every year and every month she is used to the kind of life that calls that place home. And here she sees that the salmon are greatly reduced in numbers, the river is changing before her eyes. If we don't have eyes to see it, she does. And maybe we ought to listen. There was another woman from Africa who stood up to talk about what's happening to Lake Chad in Africa. Yes, she lamented that the water is shrinking and going down, yes, she lamented that it's harder and harder to get water, that it is even dangerous when they try to get it because people are fighting for it, that the fish they rely on for food are gone. But she said something even more worrisome, and that is that beyond the lack of resources, beyond the fact that the earth is drying up before her eyes, what she sees and what she hears is Boko Haram, playing on the fears and insecurity of those who have been pushed to the very brink of poverty, recruiting them to join them, and promising them the very gift of water that is disappearing before their eyes. You see, this doesn't just affect us on a level of eating and drinking and sustenance. The climate catastrophe that is already upon us is creating organizations that do injustice, that prey on the weak with promises of something better, and sometimes I wonder and worry about whether we here in the Berkshires even notice.

The United Nations released a report this past week on climate change, and it is deeply sobering. In the next 20 years they claim the change in climate is going to push 130 million people into poverty, that the climate change is about to create 130 million new Lazaruses all

over the world. You know what they call it? They call it by a phrase that would jar our sensibilities here in the United States, that would repulse, an idea that we might be part of it. But it's being called climate apartheid – that we are participating in a system where the rich will be able to afford to mitigate these circumstances at least for a while. But it is the poor across the world who will not have that luxury. That we will not just be not seeing, but that we will be pushing into poverty by our lack of not doing anything.

I talked to the kids this morning about the idea of the origin of justice that goes back to the very beginning of Genesis, the idea that we are all created with the image of God in us, that how we treat others is how we treat God. One of the first commands that God gave those new people on earth was to be stewards of the earth, to caretake for this world, to look out for one another, to make sure that people do not fall behind, to have eyes to see and ears to hear. Because you remember justice is not just doing our best, not just taking individual action to curb our own impact, it is to actively seek out those who are already being affected and to try to right that wrong, even if sacrificially.

This story about the rich man and Lazarus has been used in so many ways, all for good reasons. But its heart is, I believe, this notion and this challenge to each of us – do we still have eyes to see and do we still have ears to hear? Because I think that if we do, if we really do, then we have a chance of believing. Because you'll remember that in our tradition, believing doesn't just mean to assent to something, doesn't just mean to wish somebody well, it doesn't just mean to think good thoughts. It is not a cognitive thing. Believing is an active thing. For when we see the people who are suffering, when we hear their actual stories from their mouths, we have a chance to believe, which is to give our hearts and lives and all of our powers over to doing what Micah commanded us to do.

I don't want to remind you what Micah told us to do, I want you to remind each other. Because it's one of the most important teachings of all of the Bible. And if we can't say it out loud in this room, how can we possibly say it out there on the street? So I'm going to ask you the question that Micah asked: "O mortals, what does the Lord require of you..." And now please answer with me: "...but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God." We need to say that again because I didn't hear you, and you need to be the ones to say it, because if not you, then who? And if not now, then when? So friends, "What does the Lord require of you?" "To do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God." One more time, because the third time is often the charm. Friends, what does the Lord require of you? "To do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God." Don't just say it in here. Say it out there. And now, in case you have forgotten already, will you rise to your feet, and will you sing the next hymn, because it will remind you of that very calling. (*Lord, Whose Love Through Humble Service* text: Albert Bayly, tune: Welsh Melody)



The Rev. Brent Damrow, Pastor