

Pentecost +16

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Amos 6:1-7, Psalm 146, 1 Timothy 6:11-19, Luke 16:19-31

Last week we saw how Jesus consistently welcomes people that seem unclean, unlikeable, and unrespectable. Jesus walks from town to town, proclaiming and enacting, “The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.”

The kingdom looks like welcoming the weak and weary to a wedding feast. The kingdom looks like a shepherd leaving the ninety-nine to find the lost sheep. The kingdom looks like a father opening his arms to restore two rebellious sons. In light of these and other stories, we come to the well-known story of the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man dresses in fine linen and feasts sumptuously every day. Lazarus begs at the rich man’s gate, begging for crumbs from the rich man. Then suddenly both men die and their fortunes are reversed. Lazarus is lifted by the angels to Abraham’s side. Whereas the rich man is tormented in the flames of Hades. Now he begs for Lazarus to give him just a taste of water. He also begs for Abraham to send Lazarus to his brothers to warn of them of this coming fate. But Abraham replies, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.’ ”

How do we read this parable in light of the coming kingdom? Jesus has been speaking with the disciples and the Pharisees. Though they have been longing for the coming of kingdom, his message and his actions are puzzling. The Pharisees questions his actions of healing on the Sabbath and eating with the tax collectors and prostitutes. Jesus does not turn a blind eye to sin, but in his encounters with the outsiders, he brings the message of forgiveness of sins.

As he is talking with the Pharisees, he confronts their own love of wealth. The passage in Luke prior to today’s story focuses on wealth. In Luke 16:13-17 we read,

¹³ No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.”

¹⁴ The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him.

¹⁵ And he said to them, “You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.

¹⁶ “The Law and the Prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone forces his way into it. ¹⁷ But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the Law to become void. ¹⁸ Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.”

He exposes two specific violations of the law in relation to the Pharisees: love of money and divorce. The rest of today’s passage will focus on the wealth. Jesus is suggesting that even though the Pharisees believe they are faithful followers of the law, they violate it in big areas even as they follow it miniscule areas. Their positions as teachers of Torah have given them status as spiritual leaders, but they are violators of Torah. They have not been faithful to the third command: You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain. They bear the name but do not demonstrate the love of God in their words and actions toward outsiders. Thus they are bearing it in vain.

As Jesus tells the story about the rich man and Lazarus, he is giving them a picture of their own disregard of the people they consider unclean, unlikeable, and unrespectable. The Pharisees long for the coming of the kingdom when they will be exalted and vindicated for their true devotion, but their own lives bear witness to the truth that they are really trusting in their wealth and their status and not in the goodness of God. They have longed for the kingdom but now that it is here in their midst, they cannot even recognize it. Their eyes are blinded by their own idolatries. They not only refuse the kingdom come, they are trying to prevent the poor, the weak, the sick to come near to the kingdom as well.

In the story, the rich man appears to ignore the needs of Lazarus the poor man. Yet, the rich man is able to feast every day. On the primary level, we see an image of the turning a blind eye to the poor. As we reflect on the story, we might see how the rich man is comfortable in his status and actually believes he is justified. He shows no guilt for his lack of regard for Lazarus. For all practical purposes, he is blind to the needs just outside his door. This blindness reveals his actual condition, he is not actually trusting in the Lord but in his own wealth and status. At the time of judgment, he is exposed and found wanting. At the end of the story, the rich man begs Abraham to send Lazarus to his family and warn them, but Abraham replies that even if someone goes from the dead, they will not be able to see.

This is possibly a subtle pointer to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. They will continue to oppose the kingdom even after Jesus rises from the dead. They have become blind to the witness of the law and the prophets and will be blind to the coming of the kingdom. This warning sounds consistent with the warnings we've been hearing from Amos.

Amos is a shepherd and a farmer, but the Lord has roused him to go and address his people. He speaks to Judah, Israel, and all their neighbors. "The Lord roars from Zion." Judgment is at hand and it will consume these lands like a raging fire. Isaiah is a royal prophet and he will pick the cry of this farmer prophet and turn it into songs. Isaiah will lament the coming destruction of God's people. For though they honor God with their lips their hearts are far away. We see their rebellion in the way they treat to most vulnerable of society: they oppress the poor, the sojourner, and the weak. Their behavior is a sign of their idolatry. Though they keep up the Temple rituals, but they also follow patterns of idolatry. When the fire finally does consume Judah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel will cry out the same words of judgment. The people have turned away from God even though they continue to follow Temple rituals. Their faith is in their wealth, their power, and their idolatries.

The prophets are drawing upon the law to declare judgment. For instance, in Deuteronomy 8 Moses declares that if the people forget God's hand in their midst, they will turn to idols and suffer judgment,

¹⁷ Beware lest you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.' ¹⁸ You shall remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your fathers, as it is this day. ¹⁹ And if you forget the LORD your God and go after other gods and serve them and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish. ²⁰ Like the nations that the LORD makes to perish before you, so shall you perish, because you would not obey the voice of the LORD your God.

If we want to know who or what we trust for our life and salvation, we might consider who we obey, who we exclude, who we reject. Our behavior will reveal our trust.

What we see happening in Amos and among the Pharisees is a people who continue to claim trust in God but are actually trusting in their wealth, their privilege, their status. Their lack of generosity is a clear sign of their hearts turned away from God.

Jesus uses the parable of the Lazarus and the rich man to warn the Pharisees that they are in danger of forgetting God even as they study his law. Jesus comes proclaiming that the kingdom of heaven is at hand but they resist him and the kingdom. Lord have mercy. I don't want to have that heart.

When he proclaims the kingdom, he is cancelling all these divisions or forms of false status dependent upon human ideas of power. The kingdom is not a Pharisee vs Sadducee thing. It is different. It is not a rich vs poor thing. Or even a Jew vs Gentile thing. It is not a black vs white thing. Or a conservative vs a liberal thing. It is not an Anglican vs a Baptist thing.

The kingdom of God is revealed in the cross of Christ that makes a way for the poor and the rich to share the same table. When Paul encounters Christ, all these divisions are stripped away. His identity is not rooted in his religious observance, his Jewish heritage, his mastery of the law, his zeal for the law of the Lord. All things are counted loss for the sake of knowing Christ Jesus his Lord. If we take this to heart, it impacts all our human relations. We engage people in and through the cross of Christ.

This is not tolerance it is love rooted in the work of Christ Jesus. This kind of love is dangerous because people both sides of any argument or division may get anger with our unwillingness to exclude, cut off the others. We hold out hope that Christ is redeeming the poor and the rich alike.

Jesus addresses both the rich men (like the Pharisees, Zacheus, and the rich young ruler) and the poor and outcast. He invites male and female, young and old, rich and poor in the kingdom of God.

I was reflecting on this sermon, I heard an old song by Bruce Cockburn that he released in the early 80s. He says that we are lovers in a dangerous time. I think that may speak to our culture today. In Christ, we are becoming lovers in the midst of a dangerous world of divisions, bringing His gospel to those on the inside and those on the outside.

Cockburn sings,

Don't the hours grow shorter as the days go by
We never get to stop and open our eyes
One minute you're waiting for the sky to fall
The next you're dazzled by the beauty of it all
Lovers in a dangerous time
Lovers in a dangerous time

These fragile bodies of touch and taste
This fragrant skin, this hair like lace
Spirits open to the thrust of grace
Never a breath you can afford to waste

Lovers in a dangerous time
Lovers in a dangerous time
Lovers in a dangerous time
Lovers in a dangerous time

When you're lovers in a dangerous time
Sometimes you're made to feel as if your love's a crime
Nothing worth having comes without some kind of fight
Got to kick at the darkness 'til it bleeds daylight

Lovers in a dangerous time
Lovers in a dangerous time
Lovers in a dangerous time
Lovers in a dangerous time