

Immanuel United Church
September 25, 2022
Proper 21 – Ordinary Time

Welcome & Announcements
Centering Music

Call to Worship:

Come and worship!

We will praise the One between, within, and over.

Trust in the One who co-creates the was, the now, and the will-be.

Our hope is in the One who creates expansive love

Calling us to do the same.

Follow the One who never breaks covenant.

We follow the One whose extravagant love calls us

To co-create justice for the oppressed,

Feed the hungry, unlock prisons,

And welcome strangers, orphans, and widows.

Praise the One whose justice is grace-full and inclusive.

We praise the Spirit that spans the ages. Amen!

Prayer written by Tim Graves, originally posted on Liturgy Bits,
found on www.re-worship.blogspot.com

Hymn: MV#12 Come, Touch our Hearts

Prayer Seeking Reconciliation and Words of Assurance:

God of Abraham and Lazarus,

We acknowledge how often we are not

Content with the simple gifts and life you offer.

Tempted by everything,

We can become insensitive to those who have nothing.

Encouraged by the world to accumulate more,

We may miss the chance to gather your

Goodness and godliness.

Chasing after all which has no value,

We may not have the energy to pursue the faith,

The love, the gentleness you have for us.

Forgive us, God of Reversals.

You have sent the One who speaks the words

We need to listen to in order to people of gratitude.

Help us to remember how you have gifted us

With all that we need for life,

And hear us as we offer up our confession

Knowing that we seek to be your hands, feet and heart

In this world.

Hear us as we pray...
(Silent prayers)

Prayer adapted from one written by Thom Shuman, which was posted on Lectionary Liturgies.
Sources from www.re-worship.blogspot.com

Hymn: MV#62 There is Room For All

Scripture: Psalm 91: 1-6, 14-16
 Luke 16: 19-31

Choir Anthem Our God is an Awesome God

Reflection

At the time in history when the story of Lazarus and the Rich man would have first been heard, wealth was understood to be a sign of God's favor, and reversely, poverty was God's displeasure. Imagine the shock and intrigue of a story like this in that context. For it is not the rich man but poor Lazarus that ends up in the company of Abraham at the end of the story.

Reversals of fortune and things being turned upside down happen all the time in the Gospel of Luke. Along with these twists and turns, the Gospel often has things to say, critiques to offer about the rich. At the heart of the rich man's critique is not so much what he possesses but what he lacks. With all his wealth he could have done so much to relieve the suffering of the man sitting outside his gate, but he chose to ignore him. This is hinted at in the very name "Lazarus" which means "God helps". This parable is also a call to us. It acts as a reminder that we are called to help those lingering at our gates. For the reality is, we are the affluent ones in our society, even though we may not see it. We are the ones with food on our tables, nice clothes to wear, comfortable places to live. So often we hear the call to help, and we try to answer but we falter, caught by the thought: "what can one person do?"

Our parable this morning can be seen as a drama in three acts. In act one, the rich appear to be rich and the poor poor. We are introduced to our main characters, but no interaction happens between the two. A tableau is created showing the way of life for each of them. The rich man is not named, but the measure of his wealth is shown by his conspicuous consumption –his dress, his things, his diet. He wears purple, maybe indicating that he was a high ranking official or maybe a member of the royal family. The Romans, at that time, had strict standards regarding who could wear purple and how much they could wear. It was expensive fabric. The man lived in a house with a gate –for privacy or security or simply to be separated from everyone else. He dressed in fine linen and ate great feasts everyday. This man had anything and everything anyone ever could want. But, as usual, the story will make it clear that the glitter of the man's life was easily scratched off.

After the rich man, we meet Lazarus. Here's a little bit of trivia....he is the only person actually given a name in the entirety of all of Jesus' parables. So can assume that his name is important because it foreshadows Lazarus' fate. Do you remember what it means? "God helps". Tragically, no one on earth helps poor Lazarus. He is a crippled homeless man

whose body is covered in weepy sores. He is 'thrown' before the rich man's gate. Any food, even the stale bread from the rich man's table, would have been appreciated. The depth of Lazarus' hardship is described with one final detail: the dogs, who actually got the scraps from the feasts, lick Lazarus' wounds as they walk by. The lives of these two men seem very, very different and separate –lives divided by a table and a gate.

In the second act, the rich become poor and the poor become rich, and two lives intertwine. Lazarus' is dead...but no details are given about how he died. We just know he is dead and that he was lifted to heaven by two angels –into the bosom of Abraham no less. Despite being neglected on earth, Lazarus is prized in the sight of God. While all this is happened the rich man suddenly dies! Do we ask how? Does it matter? We never do find out. The important thing is the contrast between what happens after the two deaths..... Lazarus is carried away by angels, while the rich man is simply buried....probably wearing his grand purple clothes.

The third and final act is by far the longest. This is the first time there is any conversation between Abraham and the rich man --Lazarus remains silent through the whole exchange. Now the rich are poor and the poor are rich. The reversal is complete.

Now, for your own information, the bosom of Abraham was considered the place of greatest bliss. The best spot in heaven, I suppose. Lazarus is hanging out with Abraham in this very happy place, while the rich man watched from his own place of torment. For once, Lazarus is an honoured guest at the feast while the rich man starved at the gates...the table has turned.

The rich man, still holding onto the shreds of his high and mighty attitude has the gall to ask Abraham to get Lazarus to dip his fingers in water so that he might dribble some in to cool the rich man's tongue. It's interesting to note here that the rich man actually knew Lazarus' name, which means he had known of Lazarus' plight in life and still did nothing about it. Would it have been better for the rich man if he hadn't known of the beggar at the gates?? Either way, the rich man doesn't see Lazarus as much more than his own personal servant.

Abraham gently reminds him of the way things were on earth...Lazarus only got scraps of stale food and neglect while the rich man lived life to its fullest not 50 feet away. Fates have been reversed. Clarence Jordan, who told the parables in the idiom of the American Old South interpreted Abraham's answer insightfully: "Lazarus ain't gonna run no mo' yo' errands, rich man."

This new gap between the two men has been cemented. Before this final act, the gap could have easily been crossed. The rich man could have come to offer Lazarus food and care, but he didn't. So now the gap keeps Lazarus from responding to the man's torment with compassion, and the man will know no relief.

To make things worse, the rich man wants Lazarus' spirit to be sent to his brothers as a warning. You see, his brothers were just as selfish and uncompassionate as he was in life. He wants them warned of the fate that waits for them, he wants them to get a chance to

seek repentance and do good things with the rest of their lives. Abraham says nope –if his brothers weren't willing to listen to Moses, the prophets and scripture they sure as heck weren't going to pay any attention to the ghost of a beggar. So the rich man can't find any relief –physical or spiritual. He had his chance to show compassion but chose not to.

So what does this mean for us? For the those of the world who live outside the gates, the good news is that “God helps”. God's bias toward those who live on the edges of society doesn't let us off the hook. The challenge for those of us who live inside the gates and confess to living faithful lives is “will you help?”

It is so easy for us to hear this parable and wonder in our hearts how it is that the rich man didn't share his abundance with someone who sat suffering so close to him. It's easy for us to bow our heads with the rich man's regret and squirm a little at the warning in the parable. But it is hard for us to answer the call inherent in the passage.... “Will you help?” Our responses tend to be variants of a theme: “what can we do?” “what can I do?” We struggle with the overwhelming state of it all. There are so many that sit at our gates, seeking compassion and support, that we simply cannot see any good coming from our few actions. What on earth can ONE SINGLE person so for ALL those that sit at the gates? Let's be clear, friends, we are called to more than charity –offering food, money, medicine are all necessary. But we need to do more than simply handing out band aids....we need to look at how we break down the walls that separate us and move toward welcoming all to the table. To move toward justice seeking, policy changes and equal treatment for all people. It is a call to move beyond our comfort zones, to push ourselves to seek out the roots of the problem. We are invited to walk through the gate and sit with those on the other side.

The rich man was only one person, but if he had shown compassion to Lazarus, He could have started change his world. Who knows what could have happened for him and we will never know, but we can be assured that if we act as one person, one lone voice, or as a group of voices, we can effect change.

A story for you:

One upon a time, there were two birds sitting on a branch of a tree. One was a dove, the other was a titmouse. They were sitting and talking about all the things going on in the world. They had heard stories from all over as they migrated and visited with other birds and were exchanging the news and gossip. Then as was their habit, they began to discuss philosophy, theology and politics. But after a while they got bored.

It began to snow, big fluffy flakes of snow. The dove looked at the titmouse and asked: “do you know how much a snowflake weighs?”

The Titmouse thought about it a while and said: “no I've never thought about it”
“Well” said the dove, “I think it weighs nothing more than nothing. I mean, look at the snow floating down, those fat, fluffy flakes”
The titmouse thought about it some and said,
“If you think a snowflake weighs nothing more than nothing, I have a little story to tell you. Once when I was sitting on a branch, just like this one, I didn't have anything to do. It

started to snow, so I began counting snow flakes, fat fluffy ones just like these. I counted a lot, couple of hundred, couple of thousand. I got up to one million eight hundred and forty six thousand, six hundred and twenty two snowflakes and then, one snowflake –which you say weighs nothing more than nothing- floated down, landed on my branch, and cracked it straight through. The branch fell to the ground and I had to fly off.”

With that the titmouse flew off, and left the dove sitting alone on the branch. The dove, who has always been associated with peace, sat there trying to figure out the story. Suddenly, it dawned on her. Of course, the snowflake, one person, when added to all the others may be the one that makes all the difference in the world.

May it be so, amen.

Hymn: MV#174 Soil of God, You and I

Offering

Offertory: MV#191 What Can I Do?

Offering Prayer

Prayer of the Community & The Prayer of Jesus

Hymn: VU#509 I, The Lord of Sea and Sky

Commissioning and Benediction