

WINNERS & LOSERS

Luke 16:19-31

September 28, 20267

All our lectionary texts for today are about justice.

Amos was a prophet in the eighth century BC. He spoke to the religious community of his day, claiming that their behavior was glutinous and self-serving—lounging on their couches, eating lambs from their flocks, singing idle songs, drinking wine from bowls, anointing themselves with the finest oils—and are not grieved over the situation.

“Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile, and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away.” (Amos 6:7) Amos’s message was a cry for justice.

The words of the psalmist speak warning about putting one’s trust in “rulers, or any child of earth.” (Psalm 146:2) God is one who provides ... who gives justice to: those who are oppressed, those who are hungry, opens eyes that are blind, cares for the stranger, etc. This also is a cry for justice.

In his letter to Timothy Paul urges his flock to live godly lives combined with contentment. God will provide. Paul sums up the temptations to fall away from the godly life in the one word, rich: “As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.” (I Timothy 6:18)

This brings us to the gospel text. Sometimes—like last week where Jesus commends the crooked manager—a parable Jesus tells is difficult to understand. I’d say that is not the case this week. Our story today is about a rich man and a diseased beggar. Boy, that’s not a hard choice as to whom I want to identify with. Or is it?

Jesus describes the rich man as “dressed in purple and fine linen, feasting sumptuously every day”. (vs. 19) In my mind this is a guy who is celebrating a “winner takes all” lifestyle. He has fought to prove that “I made it” and I did it on my own terms. Jesus describes Lazarus as one who is lying at the rich guy’s gate, sick, hungry, and generally miserable. Now, as so many of our stories or jokes go, the setting becomes a conversation after death between the lead actor in the story and God—here called Father Abraham. Before going any further let me say that I’ve subtitled this parable as: **“Winners and Losers”**.

Let’s look first at the **winner**. I see the rich man as the supposed winner in life. He fought the good fight. He achieved his every goal. He represents the first, the biggest.

He sits at the table in the place of honor. He enjoys being served by others. He doesn't know why after his death he is condemned to hell. But even in his torture he is still trying to win. He begs Abraham "to 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." (vs. 24) Having been denied that request, he says well at least send someone to tell my brothers what's going to happen to them. That was denied him as well. With one last attempt to get his way he says but if someone comes from the dead to tell them, they will believe. In the end he cannot see what has happened to him. It is particularly humiliating for him to see Lazarus sitting in the bosom of God while he burns away. I title this chapter of the story: "The Rich Man gets WOKE." [WOKE = alert to the reality of racism and social injustice]

It seems to me that every sermon I preach lately about Jesus' life and teachings comes back to the theme of justice. Yea? I wonder why. These include narrative heroes like the lost, the least, the last, the lowest, even the dead. These are Jesus' heroes because they come into the presence of God without pretense or selfishness. I think it is instructive in this story that we hear the distinction between the rich man and Abraham described as a great chasm—a chasm that cannot be breached by such incompatible orientations in life. Justice and injustice cannot sit at the same table, or walk beside one another on the same path. The rich man got WOKE—and if he did it, he did it by letting go of all pretense and selfishness.

What does all this say to us and to the church today? I see a lot of pretense, selfishness, "richness" in some expressions of Christianity today as Christian nationalism. Or I see this in our national institutions as racism. Or in our social networks as homophobia.

The rich man in our story is the personification of a winner-mentality. I think Jesus knows how much we like to win. But surely not winning at the expense of others. He tells this parable to show how drastically we need to turn things upside down. Jesus says this in so many ways. It was the lost sheep he had to save. It was the lost coin he had to find. It was the prodigal son for whom the father threw the banquet. Jesus says he came into the world not to celebrate the winner, but to save the loser. Maybe winners and losers are too harsh a label. But injustice seems to be the by-product of the "winner-take-all" mentality. Justice is surely what Jesus calls us to embrace.

I cannot sum it up any better than in quoting and paraphrasing the prophet Micah:

"With what shall I come to the Lord
and bow myself before the God on high?
Shall I come to him with burnt offerings ...

Shall I sacrifice my first-born son for my rebellious acts, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? ...

[Shall I show you my bank account and the portfolio that I have built.

Shall I show you my wedding pictures—it was really a big party; or the trophies and ribbons I have won?

Shall I bring you a list of all the work I have done for your church here on earth?]

He has told you, o man, what is good—[and sent his son, Jesus, into the world to model that goodness]—what does the Lord require of us ...

But to do **justice**, to **love kindness**, and to walk **humbly** with our God? (Micah 6:6-8)