

THERE ARE NONE SO BLIND

A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Nadene Grieve-Deslippe on September 26, 2010
Crossroads United Church

Psalm 91 **Luke 16:19-31**

There is an up side and a down side to preaching the lectionary- the scriptures chosen on a three year cycle to be read in services of worship. Among the strengths of lectionary preaching is that the same scriptures will be read in most mainline denominations on a given Sunday. So whether one crosses a holy threshold in North America or Australia, the same texts will be lifted up. They are a common denominator, which lends credibility to our unity in Christ the world over. Another strength is that using the lectionary encourages preachers to expound upon texts that some would otherwise avoid. It is a good thing to have to wrestle with texts that seem to go against the grain of contemporary social mores and values. But there is a downside to preaching the lectionary.

Sometimes it seems as though a similar teaching has been strung together in the chapters of the gospel. Chapter 15 of Luke strings together three parables on rejoicing over the return of the lost. Chapter 16 weaves together instruction on one's attitudes towards possessions. We sit and listen and think, I heard this same teaching last week. Last week we wrestled with the parable of the dishonest steward, and we learned that we are to be faithful and just with our possessions. We are to be masters and mistresses of what we have, and are not to let our passions control us. The parable from Luke for this morning is again about possessions, and one's attitude towards wealth. But there is a different emphasis this week.

Jesus could see arrogance in the Pharisees and their interpretation of the law. They saw their wealth and their love of wealth as justification by God of their own sense of righteousness. They were quick to criticize Jesus when he tried to suggest that maybe they were not seeing the whole of the scriptures in a true light. Jesus is hinting at the possibility that maybe the Pharisees were picking and choosing the scriptures that

were comfortable proof texts, and turning a blind eye and a deaf ear to those that demanded justice, equality and opening up one's purse and harvest to share with those less well off.

It was a long held belief that the righteous were rewarded, and the unrighteous punished. However, the people soon came to realize that things were not really that simple. Sometimes the unrighteous profited, and the righteous suffered. It became a matter of some concern and the book of Job is a religious debate that poses the theological question about why it is that the righteous suffers? By the time of Jesus, there was a similar disparity between the rich and the poor, and the religious elite known as the Pharisees held their position and possessions in high esteem. Their fine robes and long prayer shawls were a testament to how richly they had been blest. And they hoarded their wealth as a gift from God for their attention to detail. Jesus saw the suffering of the poor who were righteous and faithful despite their suffering, and wanted to open the eyes of the theologically blind. And so he told this parable.

For the rich man in the story life on earth is a daily banquet at a laden table. He wore the finest robes of purple and linen. He stands in marked contrast to the poor, sore infested hungry peasant camped at his gate. The rich man feasted daily, and Lazarus would have been content with the scraps that fell from his table. Both men die, and in death their fortunes are reversed. Lazarus is now feasting at the messianic banquet table, and the rich man suffers in Hades. The rich man cries out for mercy from Father Abraham, asking that Lazarus come and minister in mercy to the fallen. But there is a chasm that separates the two men, and their resting place.

Having learned his lesson the rich man then requests that Lazarus go to his living brothers and warn them to change their ways. Surely one returning from the dead should be convincing. But the response is that his brothers- like the rich man- have the law and the prophets where the proper attitude of the wealthy to the poor is recorded. If they pay no heed to the scriptures, what makes the man conclude that a risen Lazarus or a resurrected Jesus would make a difference?

The Pharisees paid strict attention to the scriptures that were a testament to the blessing of the righteous, but were poorer students of the laws that commanded the wealthy to share with those in need. The Law of Moses specifically commanded that the harvest be shared with the poor and the transient. From Deuteronomy 15: 11 we read “Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and the needy in the land.’” And from Isaiah 58:7-7 “Is this not the fast I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the throngs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not hide yourself from your own flesh?”

There are copious scriptures that attest to the righteous being rewarded, but there are also myriad texts that command the well to do to share with those less fortunate. The Pharisees would pick and choose the texts that affirmed a very narrow and self- serving interpretation of the law, and were blind to those texts that commanded that they share with those in need. Jesus is not chastising the Pharisees so much as encouraging them to see the whole picture. Neither is he suggesting a new interpretation of the law. He is extolling that the religious elite be mindful of the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. And yet he seems to also be a little cynical in his assessment of the Pharisees ability to change. For the parable closes in reference to the brothers of the rich man in the story, “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”

This is not an easy text for us to integrate in our day and age. Like the man in the parable we might choose to ignore a beggar oozing with sores who is encamped at the end of our driveway. We would probably call the police to have him removed. Out of sight, out of mind! And at the risk of making us all feel guilty I would suggest that many of us might be more akin to the rich man in the story than we are comfortable admitting. We too can wear our piety on our faces like a proud Pharisee. We too might be inclined to think of ourselves as deserving respect and entitlement because of our upright

morals, and our pristine work records. And Jesus would not love us an iota less. But Jesus continues to hold up the mirror for our self- reflection in this parable.

The point that Jesus was making that day is the same lesson that we are all being challenged to ponder in our day. He was trying to make the pious Pharisees of his generation mindful of the whole of scripture- the law and the prophets. He does not chastise or admonish the religious elite in the texts. He has been derided and criticized for taking a stand alongside of the poor. The Pharisees judged the poor as simply reaping what they have sown in accordance with their limited understanding of the law. They would be quick to suggest that the poor and the downtrodden were getting what they deserved, just as the wealthy were being rewarded for their righteousness. But Jesus is trying to enlighten the Pharisees on the whole of the law and the prophets. They cannot simply pick and choose the letter of the law that is most comfortable, and be blind to the rest. Sometimes the unrighteous prosper, just as sometimes the righteous suffers.

There are some that I might be inclined to walk on by, but I would like to think that if there was a Lazarus encamped at the end of my gate that I would not be able to forever turn a blind eye to hunger, nakedness and illness. Indeed, my heart has been stretched, broken and mended again by standing on holy ground with the suffering righteous that have not asked for their lot in life, and who bear up with grace under pressure. Young parents who have lost babies in infancy; children who face their illness and even death with courage and conviction; young men and women in the prime of their lives who are felled by terminal illness have all touched me with their gracious acceptance. They too would be grateful for the scraps of life and hope to fall from the tables of the well to do and the prosperous, but most of them accept their lot with grace that is inspired and holy.

The challenge to those who have health and wealth is to see that we are no more blest by God than those who have not. And the wisdom of law, prophet and gospel verily cries out to remember who you are to whom you belong. Be grateful to God for

your bounty, but love God more than your reserves. Be thankful that yours is not an addiction that controls you and do not judge those for whom it is otherwise. And give God thanks and praise for every moment of good health and fortune that is yours for not one of us knows the day or the hour when everything could change for us. Remember the promises of the Psalmist and live your life accordingly. For those who love God will be delivered. They will be protected. When they cry out to God, God will hear and respond.

May our eyes be opened to the gifts of grace, and the demands of discipleship, and may our hearts be attuned to respond as Christ. Amen.