

25 September 2016
The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
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As I write these words, it's storming rain outside; Tonight's news report four innocents dead in a shooting in a mall in Washington state; Terence Crutcher of Tulsa dead at the hands of a police officer; Lamont Scott of Charlotte NC likewise, and the city under curfew. Bombing of Aleppo in Syria as a prelude to sending in ground troops to what was a beautiful, history-rich city, now in ruins.

How long, O Lord? How long?

And yet...and yet.

Many of our youth (and some adults) went Saturday morning to participate in "Chalk the Walk" downtown, to raise awareness and money to end hunger in Cleveland County; There are cool temperatures and fall weather coming behind the downpour; The chief of police of Norman met with the ministerial association on Wednesday to explore how we can rebuild the network of relationships and trust in our town. Before "something happens." An act of violence, or an act of nature—so that when it does, we can be there for one another. We'll already know one another.

Our reading from Jeremiah today is a story of "and yet...and yet."

The city of Jerusalem is under siege, and will ultimately fall to the Babylonian army. The leaders of the people will be taken away into exile; those remaining behind will be under the domination of a foreign military power.

Jeremiah himself is in jail, placed there to keep him from further troubling the king and his advisers. And possibly to keep him safe from those who would do him greater harm.

And yet. And yet.

In the midst of all this, a word from God comes to Jeremiah. "Your cousin is going to pay you a visit in prison." Totally random....out of nowhere.

And it happens. Cousin Hanamel comes to visit, apparently in need of money, and asks Jeremiah to buy a piece of land that has been in the family for generations. And Jeremiah does it—with multiple copies of the bill of sale, and witnesses, and the ancient Hebrew version of the notary public in attendance—all there in the prison with him, mind you—

And then he hands the documents to another friend and says "Take these and hold on to them. Because even though there's a war going on outside the city walls; even though there will be days of loss and nights of grief yet to come; even though we who are here may not live to see the day...this place, this city, this country, will be a place of abundance and goodness again. The good land will produce good things; the Good Lord will be among us, here and even in exile, even in the hard days yet to come.

Even when it looks like the end, it is also a new beginning.

We know that, people of God.
We know that, followers of Christ.
We know that, children born of the Holy Spirit.

Sometimes we forget it, but then we remember. We are “re-membered” in that truth, that Way, that Life that Jesus promises.

In this comical enacted parable, Jeremiah uses all that he has—his money, and his network of relationships and influence—to tell his hearers something important. Don’t give up. God’s not done with us yet.

Jesus tells the third of three stories this morning about “a rich man.” We heard about the Prodigal Daddy, and we heard about the Prodigal Master who hired the Shady Manager. Now we hear about this third character, “a certain rich man” who is sometimes called “Dives” (which means “rich”) and Lazarus, a poor man who spends his days on the sidewalk outside the rich man’s front door. The rich man is ridiculously rich—all the details about his wardrobe and dining habits are totally over-the-top. Lazarus, we are told, is even more pitiful than the dogs of the household, who get to eat the crumbs and scraps from the table.

Lazarus sees Dives every day, going out and coming in, very busy and distracted.
He knows who he is.
Dives sees Lazarus every day, sitting there in the street just outside the garden gate.
He knows Lazarus by name, apparently.
But he sees without knowing; he looks but does not perceive.

Both men die. Well, that happens. The birth-to-death ratio is, as it always has been, 1:1.

But then we discover them in the hereafter. Lazarus is sitting with Father Abraham, the patriarch of the people of Israel. (Actually “sitting on his lap”) and Dives...well, he’s in The Other Place. “Hades” is the Greek term; the Hebrew scriptures speak of “Sheol”, the place of the dead. Not “hell” as we picture it in later Christian iconography, which in the West is mostly the imagery of Dante’s *Inferno* anyway.

A dialogue ensues between Dives and Father Abraham. Even in death, the rich man looks and sees without really perceiving or understanding. “Father Abraham!” he shouts. “Send Lazarus over here to bring me a drink of water, I’m terribly thirsty.” He still thinks that he’s got servants (Lazarus being one of them) to order about, even in the hereafter.

“Child!” Abraham answers him. “That’s not how it works. You remember all the good stuff you enjoyed, while Lazarus was in misery? Now it’s his turn for some good stuff, and you’ve had yours already.” It is a completely unsubtle and even comical restatement of the Gospel of Luke’s favorite theme: The Great Reversal. Back to chapter 1, Mother Mary’s song in Zechariah and Elizabeth’s living room: “God has put down the mighty...and lifted up the humble and meek; God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty...”

“Well, pooh.” says Dives. “In that case, send Lazarus to warn my brothers to change their behavior.” He STILL doesn’t get it.

“They have Moses and the prophets” says Abraham. “That should be more than enough.”

“No, but if someone comes to them from the dead, they will listen.”

“Look you...” (I can just see Abraham rolling his eyes over this) “...if they won’t listen to the teaching that has been given to God’s people for all these years about what it means to be rich (in goodness, in generosity, in sharing with those in need in your own front yard) then it will make no difference to them, ***even if someone rises from the dead.***”

Even if Lazarus comes to them, with Martha and Mary running behind him in amazement.
Even if Jesus comes to them, with Mary Magdalene and Peter and John and all the others.

Dives and his brothers are not condemned for being rich; being rich is not the problem.

Being willfully ignorant is the problem.

Having done no good for no one besides themselves, they have chosen not to enter into “the life that really is life” (as the letter to Timothy calls it) in the present life, and so they know nothing of it in the life that is to come.

Is this the end of the story?

I’ve heard preachers who think so. I’ve heard this passage used in some very creative and hair-raising ways to frighten people into believing in a certain sort of cosmology of the afterlife, all things over and done at the moment of physical death and that’s all there is to it. So you better “get right with God” before it’s too late.

But that’s not the Gospel of the Jesus Christ I worship.

In that good news, there’s always room for repentance. God’s not done with us yet, ever.

And who is it, that we say has the power over death and hell?

Oh yes.

And yet...and yet. There is a choice to be made. Day by day; moment by moment. Will I, will we, choose to follow the way of Jesus? To love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength; to love our neighbor (unfamiliar, unpleasant, not like us) as we love ourselves?

It doesn’t mean “anything goes.” It does mean vulnerability, and a willingness to shape our own lives in the shape of the cross. Head up, toward the things of heaven; feet down, toward the things of the here and now (even the messy and dirty stuff); arms stretched out in service and prayer and welcome. We do not earn the love of God; but we can demonstrate and show it. And this is what it looks like.

*When I survey the wondrous cross, where the young Prince of glory died,
my richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride.*

*Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were an offering far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.*