

Last week we received one of Jesus' most bizarre and perplexing stories. Today, we receive one of his harshest stories. It is interesting that we are given this reading just days after we have seen world leaders gather for the UN General Assembly and address the multitude of problems facing this world, the biggest of which is climate change. The UN Chief did not mince words as he prophetically sounded a global alarm, warning leaders about the survival of humanity and the planet. For those of us who follow the teachings of Jesus, we discover God calls us to **compassionately act** in **response** to the many crises in our present context. Now, as we respond to Jesus' message, some may say his teachings are just for our private lives, not for our public behavior, or he is irrelevant to our times. But, as the Rev. Jim Wallis writes in his book, *Christ in Crisis: Why We Need to Reclaim Jesus*, he says, "**That is hard to do for those who call themselves Christians, if God so loved the world.**" You see, if the gospel has no meaning for our current, present context and does not inform the way we respond to injustice, the gospel really has NO meaning.

In **all** of today's readings, we hear words about **justice** and **faithful stewardship**, messages that are **very** relevant to this present moment. In the reading from Luke's gospel, **justice** is presented as an eschatological

(meaning *end of time*) balancing of the scales: those who suffered in need are made full, and those who have reveled in excess are left empty. This story is all about a call to live a certain way in the **here and now** of everyday life. Jesus has been having a conversation with the Pharisees about the love of money and the desire for riches and, today, we find him continuing that conversation. He tells the Pharisees yet another story, another parable that is rather difficult to hear. Borrowing from what scholars believe was an Egyptian tale, Jesus tells the story of two worlds: the world of the **haves** and the world of the **have-nots**, the world of the rich and the world of the poor, the world of the comforted and the world of the afflicted. And, the boundaries between the two are very clearly defined.

The writer of Luke's gospel was extremely concerned about the proper use of wealth, something that is not only the focus of all three of our readings today, but also something that is threaded through the entirety of Luke's telling of the Jesus story. As we dig into this story, we need to understand that, in this parable, Luke is **not** trying to settle issues about the afterlife or eternal punishment. No. Luke **is** addressing the way we live our lives, **here and now in this present moment**. As Jesus tells this story, he uses a good deal of hyperbole to address those who love their money more than people, their possessions more than the poor, their clothes more than

compassion, and their extravagant feasts more than sharing food with the hungry. And, it is very clear that Jesus has **no** pity for those who should know better. The rich man in this story has **no** way of pretending that he did not know the plight of Lazarus in this life, since the poor man was brought directly to his door, presumably by friends, or fellow beggars. And, the tale of the afterlife tableau is one of merciless pain suffered by the rich man, pain which **cannot** be alleviated. Even when the rich man asks for his family to be warned and spared, he is told that all they need to know is already available, and even if Jesus would be raised from the dead, they would not mend their ways.

The themes presented in Jesus' parable stand as powerful indictments of our present context. The ever-widening chasm between the rich and the poor is one of the most important issues of our day, not just for residents in this country but also for residents around the globe. This is already impacting migration issues. And this gap or chasm is going to become greater as we continue to see the effects of climate change. Climate change is going to create increased migration challenges throughout the world. How are we as a country going to respond?

The great divide between Lazarus and the rich man didn't spring up upon their deaths or after the last judgment; it was created **by** the rich man

while **both** of them were **living**. There is no escaping this indictment in Jesus' story. This is a parable urging "the haves" to **do justice now**, for there will be **no** opportunity later.

The message that is implicit in this story is that those who help create the economic divide by greed and selfishness will **not** be able to right it for themselves in any other life than **this** present one. And, as we look at the present and necessary focus on issues like immigration, war, global hunger, and climate change, as we look at the call to care for the poor and needy, and the call to care for the creation we have been given, the rich in this world control resources like land and money, and the rich control systems of taxation that perpetuate the "great divide," this chasm. As we look at climate change and its increasing effects upon people, the poor of this world are the ones who already face the greatest risk. They are and will continue to be the ones who suffer the most. Warnings and messages are coming in every form. Climate change is already happening, but too often these warnings remain unheeded.

The Rev. Sally Bingham, eco-minister and founder of Interfaith Power & Light, says that abuse of natural resources and pollution of your neighbor's air is a sin against creation. If we love our neighbors, we **don't** pollute our neighbor's air. She fervently says, "The environmental crisis is

a **theological** problem, a problem that stems from our view of God and how we relate to God and each other. And, that makes it important for the church to wrestle with this issue. You see, our view of God can be one that encourages and/or permits destructive, unjust behavior or one that encourages right relationship and harmony with **all** of the created order.”

Bingham considers scientists some of our modern-day prophets. Scientists told us decades ago that carbon dioxide was a heat trapping gas and too much of it would trap heat close to the earth, causing our planet and our oceans to get increasingly warm. We didn't listen and became overly dependent on fossil fuels for energy. We are now paying the price for not listening. And, our children and grandchildren are going to pay a much greater price! But it isn't too late. Scientists say we have a window of about eight more years if we intentionally work hard to prevent the **worst** scenario before us. Scientists say 2030 will be a pivotal year. So, hopefully, we still CAN still fend of the worst of what looms before us.

Addressing climate change is a **moral** issue, one that requires a **change** in people's **hearts** and **minds**. Sally Bingham writes:

What institution changes hearts and minds? Churches and that is why the religious voice is so important in this dialogue as we look for solutions to climate change. As religious people we **must** do our part – and we have a big role in this. If we don't protect creation, how can we possibly expect others to? Moral leadership sits right here with **us**...Our job then is to become **informed**, do our part and work so

that people understand we will **not** be the healthy children that God intended and we will **not** live on a healthy planet **unless** we can get beyond partisanship and do what is right for the entire communion of life. The creation that God called good, the creation where God put us and instructed us to till and keep this garden, is the creation that sustains us and will sustain us **if** we do our part... We have a responsibility to each other, to the future and to God. [And, if we do our part,] we **will** be the people that God placed in the garden to till it and to keep it. We **will** be obeying the first and great commandment to love God and each other and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Christians cannot look at the current state of the world, including related issues of climate challenge, immigration, and so much more and claim ignorance. These are hard days, to be sure. In today's reading, Jesus lays before us the importance of relational social issues as we live our lives **right here and right now**. This harsh story Jesus shares leaves us with a call to **act**, based on the visibility of the suffering face that is present to us in this very time and in this very moment. The suffering face of humanity and this very earth become for us, the face of Christ himself.

People of God, we are called to live into God's dream of **justice** for this **entire** world, **for the sake of the world**. God created us to live in relationship with **all** others, and with the gift of this amazing **creation** we have been given. The abundant, eternal life, life that truly matters, the life Jesus calls us into **comes through** the community of **creation**, and that abundant life starts **now, as we live into God's call** and seek justice and abundant life for our neighbors and for the **all** of **creation**.