

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

September 29, 2019  
The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 16:19-31  
Amos 6:1a,4-7  
Psalm 146  
1 Timothy 6:6-19

---

After a difficult week in our nation, after report upon report of wrong doing, of speculation, of accusations...I just want to come up for air. So, I think it's important for us this morning to acknowledge the heaviness of the world we are living in, to claim our frustrations, to name what for many feels like an impossible journey to reconciliation.

I can only speak for myself but I am deeply troubled at our growing national animosity, distrust, and angry rhetoric. I am deeply troubled by our suspicions of one another, by our inability to feel confident in our government, and by our willingness to look the other way. Many days, I feel discouraged and overwhelmed. I keep wondering...how did we get here?

And then, I read our passages from Luke and Amos, and Timothy. I read Psalm 146...do not put your trust in princes, in mortals in whom there is no help. Psalm 146 talks of hope in God, our God who executes justice for the oppressed, who gives food to the hungry, who sets prisoners free and opens the eyes of the blind. This is our God who lifts up those who are bowed down and watches over strangers. This is our God who takes care of orphans and widows.

In times of disillusionment, these texts offer hope. They offer direction. They offer a way to get up and get busy with doing some good. Are we listening?

I was reminded this week that we have got to get serious about what the body of Christ is supposed to look like. And, we have got to get serious about who we are called to be. There can be no more putting it off until another day, when we have more time, when it's more convenient. Christ didn't offer us excuses. He called us to action.

Luke tells us of a rich man who day in and day out ignores a poor, homeless man named Lazarus who sits outside of his gates. Imagine the contrast...the rich man in his lavish purple robes and expensive linen walking past the homeless man in tattered, dirty, smelly clothes. The rich man turning his head away, stepping to the side to keep his clothes clean. Lazarus looking up time and time again waiting to be seen, to be acknowledged. The rich man making excuses. Lazarus begging for hope. The contrast is painful to consider. Because we know that the rich man doesn't listen. He doesn't look. He doesn't act. He does nothing. And, Lazarus suffers.

When both men die, the rich man finds himself in Hades while Lazarus is finally at peace with Abraham. The rich man then becomes the one begging for help. He begs Abraham to allow Lazarus to go back and tell the man's brothers how to do better so that they don't end up being tormented in hell. Abraham replies with a harsh truth...if they haven't listened to the prophets by this point, they will never listen.

They will never listen to the needs of the oppressed. They will never listen to the needs of the hungry, the abused, the poor, the suffering. Luke has been full of these kind of parables for weeks now. Sunday after Sunday we have been inundated with desperate pleas by Jesus to make a difference, to not sit on our hands looking the other way. Jesus is doing all he can to call our attention to the world around us so that we rise out of our complacency to a place of empowerment. Because God gave us all gifts. God gave us all opportunities. God gave us all the charge to love and to heal and to make known the power of God's love in the world.

Mother Teresa once said that it may be fashionable to talk about the hungry but it may not be as fashionable to talk to them.

I heard this quote the other day relayed by Shane Claiborne who had spent a lot of time working alongside Mother Teresa in Calcutta. He was convicted that there was a whole lot more to believing in Jesus than just talking about faith. He had been a born again Christian from Pennsylvania. In fact, he says he had been born again over and over, year after year each time a revival came to town he gave himself to God. But, he noticed that his embodiment of faith, his willingness to act, didn't get the same serious kick start as his verbal commitment to his faith at these revivals. And so, he committed to working with Mother Teresa for a time.

Mother Teresa taught him an important lesson...we all have a Calcutta in our midst. We just need to look around and find it. Shane found his Calcutta not far from where he grew up.

In 1995, Shane heard about dozens of homeless families, mostly mothers and children, who had moved into an abandoned Catholic church. They were eventually told by the Archdiocese that they had 48 hours to move out or face arrest. In an act of desperation, they hung a banner on the front of the building that said, "How can we worship a homeless man on Sunday, and ignore one on Monday?"

Out of their resistance, The Simple Way was founded, in the Kensington neighborhood of Philadelphia. This broken industrial neighborhood full of empty factories, empty homes, depleted resources and more hopelessness than you can imagine, became a place they said no more.

In January 1998, they pulled enough money together to buy a small empty store front that became a home. Then they were able to add a few more abandoned homes to the community. The Simple Way, co-founded by Shane Claiborne, was the organizing principle behind the movement, a movement led by committed people of faith. These committed people started to listen and started to help these individuals in this forgotten community get back on their feet. They shared resources and learned to grow food. The Simple Way provided emergency services and scholarships to help young people go to college and break the cycle of poverty. There was no longer a Lazarus sitting on their doorsteps waiting to be seen. The Gospel became tangible.

That is what we call resurrection living. When our faith commitments become tangible, outward signs of God's grace. Folks, there is more to faith than just believing in Jesus. That's the point. Shane Claiborne once stated that, "It's hard to believe there is a beautiful God when all of the things you see are ugly."

I might say, it's hard to believe that love and mercy and reconciliation can indeed exist when hatred and suspicion and anger prevail. But God calls us to act. God calls to look for the Lazarus in our midst and not turn away.

What kind of faith do you want? What kind of faith would Jesus expect of you? Amen.