

“The Church of No Regrets”

(Amos 6:1a,4-7; 1 Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31)

9/25/22

Rev. J Koyama

Today, rather than having a new Order of Confession, I decided to use the traditional one because it contains the words: “We have sinned against you, O God, not only by what we have done but “by what we have left undone”. And it is the “undone” part that I’d like to consider, because in our Gospel reading, the rich man who is burning in hell, is there, not so much as a result of what he did during his life, but what he didn’t do.

Unshared Wealth

(By the way, you may notice that readings about sharing and withholding wealth and social inequality are coming up a lot right now. And it reminds me of a well-known theologian who illustrated how big a concern this is in the Bible, by waving a Bible around from which he had cut all references to these wealth and social justice with a pair of scissors. The Bible was literally falling apart. And in his other hand, he might have held up a Bible in which negative references to same-sex relationships were cut out and that Bible would be completely intact. You would have to search carefully for the few holes and probably wouldn’t find them unless you knew where to look. It is an interesting illustration of the difference between what the Bible considers important and what we choose to fixate on).

The rich man spent his life enjoying his advantages, “feasting sumptuously, every day” while at his gates lay the poor man Lazarus, who longed to eat even the crumbs that fell from his table. Apparently, this Rich man was so focused on pampering himself, that he never went to the trouble of tending to the needs of the poor man. And when his life was over, the opportunity to do so was gone and he found himself burning in “Hades” (which is roughly translated as “hell,” although it also used to refered to a kind of afterlife limbo).

Hades the Metaphor

You may know that understandings about “hell” vary today, so it is probably important to say that the passage can be understood in different ways. Some think of hell as a real location to which sinners go, with real flames. They may feel that it is legitimate to frighten or coerce others into good behavior in order to save them from that fate. And, in fact, you don’t have to go any further than today’s Gospel to see that Jesus himself is essentially warning us to repent or roast in hell.

But it is also possible to think of hell, not so much as a location, but as a metaphor for what happens to our souls when we live in a way that keeps us separated from God. And in keeping with this, many Christians today, including myself, believe that it is better to

understand Christian life as something that is motivated by grace, by the power of God's love, rather than as a fearful attempt to escape being thrown into hell.

I myself am inclined to see hell more as a metaphor rather than a place. But that doesn't mean the experience of hell is not real. The way I read it, the flames that torment the rich man are better understood, not as literal flames, but as "flames" of regret. And if you know what it is like to be tormented by regret, then you know that being in a hell of flames is a good way to describe it.

I know, for example, that there are people who are tormented by the fact that they were never able to say "I love you" to someone who has gone on ahead. I was able to say these words to both my parents, and yet even now, I am tormented by the knowledge of how much more I could have done, but never did.

I'm sure that one of the most serious regrets we can have is that our lives might somehow turn out to have been wasted and that those things that we could have done but didn't do, turned out to be the things that were most needful. What a torment it would be to live an entire earthly life consumed with trivia and on the last day suddenly see and realize that all this time we were blind to the very thing our

hearts most needed to accomplish in order to go home to God without regrets.

It makes you think of those Halloween stories of ghosts wandering about in haunting houses, groaning and sighing, unable to rest in peace, because some disturbing event in their lives is unresolved.

(You can imagine the family holding a séance to communicate with the ghost, to ask “What can we do here, so that you can rest in peace?”)

Bucket Lists: Avoiding Regrets

It seems to me that today, the desire to be free of regrets is most often expressed by creating bucket lists, that typically contain items like: I want to see the Northern Lights or I want to run a marathon or swim in every ocean. And I am sure that many of these experiences can contribute to our desire to have lived a full life – (pause) - although one consideration is that our buckets are potentially bottomless and trying to fill them could become a never ending quest, like chasing after a receding mirage. That would be its own kind of hell.

But the Gospel reading this morning seeks to save us from having regrets at a level deeper than the level items on a typical bucket list can

address. Jesus encourages us to respond compassionately to the needs of others, while we can. And he does so, because meeting the needs of others activates within us the one thing that most needs to be activated in order for our lives to be fulfilled - our relationship with God.

Participating in God's love for the world is the one thing, apart from which we can never be satisfied or fulfilled. We need that grace, every bit as much as did the Rich Man who cried out in his thirst that someone might touch his tongue with a drop of water.

And engaging in these acts of compassion without delay is so important because the time will come when there is no longer time. And we will either go home rejoicing in peace rejoicing or we will languish in flames of regret over a wasted life that was blinded by and preoccupied with trivia.

The Rich Man and the Immigrant

The image of the man Lazarus sitting outside the gate of the Rich Man is also timely and instructive, because it speaks powerfully to what is happening today in the controversy over immigration.

There is no question which character most closely resembles us in this story and which represents the hunger and longing of Lazarus. We are the Rich Man except that unlike him, we still have time. And Lazarus

represents those who are fleeing from oppression and economic hardship and seeking asylum in our midst. Some such as the Afghan refugees, risked their lives to defend our troops and our values. Many are as willing to do hard jobs that we generally shun, or are simply driven by hunger as was Lazarus who would have gladly eaten the crumbs off of the Rich Man's table.

It is clear that the immigration question is a difficult question. How would this morning's Gospel read if, instead of just Lazarus, there were a hundred or a thousand Lazarus's lying outside the Rich Man's door. Would that change the story? Would the message change to a warning that, if you feed one beggar, the other beggars will see it and you will have to feed them all, and then your resources will be overwhelmed? In that case, maybe you should not feel regret about leaving Lazarus unfed outside the gate, because it is a practical necessity.

This Gospel story doesn't take into account that kind of complexity. But if we look at the example of Jesus's ministry in the Galilee, we see that, even though he was swamped by endless crowds of needy, suffering people, he never turned anyone away, but ministered to them all.

It is interesting that, at one point in his ministry, Jesus seems to be complaining, that there are limits to who he should be responsible for. A Canaanite woman, a foreigner, comes to him out of urgent need. And Jesus tries to fend her off with the words:

“I was sent only to the Lost Sheep of the house of Israel. It is not fair to take the children’s food and feed it to the dogs”.

Jesus is drawing a line around his own people as the only people he is responsible for. And he down plays her significance and value by comparing her to the dogs that hang around under the table.

It is a very cruel and disrespectful comment. And it signals to us that even Jesus, perhaps because he is already overwhelmed, is annoyed by the prospect of having to extend his help beyond the usual boundaries; that he would rather just shut her out. Perhaps even he, in that moment of feeling overextended, knew the temptation of the rich man, to ignore the needy man at his gate.

But the Canaanite woman responds: “Yes Lord, Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” And Jesus immediately does a 360, recognizing her humanity, her humility and the respect she has shown him, in spite of the disrespect he had shown her. And he

immediately he offers her the same kindness he would offer to his fellow Israelites.

That Story is one of the pivotal stories in the entire New Testament, because it describes the moment when it becomes crystal clear for the first time that the love of God in Jesus Christ is for all people. Jesus does not care for others on the basis of whether they are insiders or outsiders. He cares for all who humbly approach him out of desperate need.

But this Gospel story applies to much more than immigrants. It applies also to the way Americans treat other Americans who are at the bottom of the economic ladder and are struggling for even a sliver of the American dream. And it applies most directly to the increasing number of God's children globally, who are going hungry today on account of the disruption of supply chains caused by warfare, environmental and other issues. Because the cry of Lazarus, is first and foremost, a cry for food.

It would be easy to simply stand at the window and look with a broken heart at Lazarus as he sits hungry outside the gate. But there are also places where God's grace pops up like buds in springtime. It gladdens

my heart, when I look at our church's web page and see the regular initiatives taken within our membership to reach out and do the things that could so easily have been left undone. These initiatives reveal that the love of God is present and at work in our congregation.

The fall season is here and we are alive and we have a whole new opportunity to feed Lazarus in whatever shape or form he chooses to present himself. And I can already hear the pots and pans beginning to move and the aroma of good things being cooked up to share with all who come. Let's be the glorious "Church of No Regrets."