

Final Jeopardy
Amos 6:1, 4-7; Luke 16: 19-31

Last month, the New York Times had an interesting article on the demise of the American church. The article was called, "Congregations Gone Wild". The author, a pastor in the United Church of Christ in Massachusetts, said, "...churchgoers increasingly want pastors to soothe and entertain them...(in the process, pastors) are no longer expected to ...deliver sermons that make the comfortable uneasy." The threat is that pastors are beginning to feel like "soothsayers," "entertainers" and the "spiritual equivalent of concierges."

I do not feel that here. But I do feel the trend gaining momentum when I speak to pastors among my clergy cohorts. And so it's with this felt preference that I left my first reading of our text for this morning and began to prepare a sermon.

Now, if nothing else, when you're reading scripture and you hear Luke's Jesus begin a story with, "There was a rich man," you know that it's not going to be easy. -And it's certainly not going to lead to be stand-up material. Maybe this is why so many pastors choose to sidestep the gospel lesson this morning. Who wants to put his congregation - or himself - to such a test?

And so we're back to entertainment. And for me, the ideas of entertainment and a test can lead to only one thing: Jeopardy. For a while in our family, Jeopardy ruled the dinner hour. TiVo set, we would fast forward over Commerce Bank Time and the introductions and go straight for the first answer. ...The implications of this text set up perfectly for a Jeopardy category of their own. I'd call it, "Things that divide." Certainly money and personal financial wealth are grounds for division. But so are body type and education levels, introversion and extroversion. ...Religious views and biblical interpretation as well as one's *perceived* level of spirituality. Neighborhoods lead us to think about division, and not simply between zip codes. Private clubs certainly make no pretense that divide. And then there is the matter of giftedness.

Luke's Jesus was all about telling the rich man where he would go. Luke's Jesus was all about setting up dichotomies between those he might categorize as the oppressed and the oppressors. And this is where the text leads us today: to a rich man who consciously or unconsciously oppressed Lazarus until their death, upon which the pitiful and the rich received his eternal reward. No one wants to hear this except for the deeply impoverished who finally have something to look forward to!

But we do hear of people all around the world – rich people – who do their part to ameliorate the plight of the poor. The Gates Foundation is usually top of mind when we think about grand gestures abroad. But did you hear the announcement just this past week that a young guy named Mark Zuckerberg gave \$100 MM to the Newark School district? Apparently, he wants to help get educational system back on track. Talk about a rich guy trying to bridge the great divide between the youth of America. Mark Zuckerberg is the 27 year old CEO of Facebook and arguably one of the richest men in the world. He has no tie to Newark, but he told NPR that he believes in what's happening in Newark and he likes to invest in people he believes in. What he did, actually, is set up a foundation for Newark School System with \$100 million of Facebook stock. His generosity is in attempt to close the great divide between a very rich man who credits much of his success to the outstanding schools he has been afforded to attend, and school children whose educational facilities and programs are so pathetic that they were taken under state control 15 years ago.

When I read stories like this one, I get excited. I get excited about all that I would do if I had access to wealth of the likes of Mark Zuckerberg or Bill and Melinda Gates.

This is one of the many potential pitfalls to reading this story of the Rich Man and Lazarus. It's easy to consider dreamlike, or even inapplicable, a story that lifts up extremes. In this story, we're talking about one man who's portrayed as remarkably wealthy and we're talking about a man who's portrayed as so desperately poor in every way that the dogs even lick his sores. While some among us are likely quite comfortable, I don't believe that many of us would consider ourselves to be downright, dirty rich. Now, while some of us feel frustrated by our inability to buy or do certain things, I am confident that none of us fall into the category of destitution. This dichotomy of extremes could lead us to walk from the story entirely since we don't relate to either man. This is very permission giving, setting us up to claim that the text doesn't belong to us at all. On the other hand, it could rightfully lead us to think about even those places in ourselves where we are feeling like we've been trampled on recently, or we might begin to notice are places where we've consciously or unconsciously trampled on others.

When we begin to consider all of the ways that you and I also propagate division among those with whom we have daily contact, the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus suddenly jumps off of the page. If we are reasonably healthy Christians, the text immediately makes us feel uneasy. How are we living our lives in such a way that we not only call attention to the differences among God's children, but we also feel consciously or compelled to subjugate others to our sense of what is the better riches?

Luke's Jesus would call it the stuff that creates an eternal chasm.

This sets up grounds for an obvious conversation in which we might consider how a person with middle class or even richer means might find a way to bridge the divide between his comfortable lifestyle and another's lacking one. It also sets up the obvious question of how someone with a certain body type can look to someone who's built differently and identify a way to help us all become healthier. And it sets a path for someone with tremendous life experience to influence the journey of someone with more formal education. Then, how can extroverts and introverts sit in the same room for more than a 15-minute frustrating talk? Or how can Protestants and Muslims, Fundamentalists and Jews live in affirmation of one another's religious dedication? Can some be drawn into another's neighborhood for reasons other than a Saturday yard sale? Are the people down the hill only welcome in a private club as its wait staff. And exactly what *is* giftedness beyond the eye of the beholder?

So many of us are bound by the divisions of this world - great and small - and feel ourselves defeated. We feel defeated by our seeming inability to combat the fat swell of ignored need in our midst - cumulated, simple need like compassion between colleagues and patience amongst family members with differing views, as well as grand need the likes of which requires a \$100MM foundation grant. Once we allow ourselves to look beyond the vast chasm of need that can make us feel defeated before we begin or too unrelated to our present station in life to compel us to launch any sort of change, we can begin to see all of the diverse ways in which we can close the much more tangible divides between the many forms of oppression and oppressing.

Amidst the inescapable truths of abject poverty and exceeding wealth there is a groundswell of much change that is required in our families, our friendships, our neighborhoods and our world. - Much that is changeable by you and by me. These changes, once begun, create a manifestation of the Eternal in our very midst and a glimpse of the glory of salvation to come.

The eternity promised in today's text is a threat for all of us who are well off, respected and secure, just as the eternity promised in today's text offers hope for those who are impoverished in so many ways. To borrow from Paul Tillich, one of the most influential Protestant theologians of the 20th century, so much of each of our lives consists in nothing but attempts to look away from this potential

end (Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, (NYC: Penguin Books, 1947). p 20.). We are compelled to look away from the end and so we ignore the circumstances of our days. This brings a tension into our lives that gnaws at those of us who see our riches as a sort of shield from the poverty that we know we should be willing to address. This end becomes our Final Jeopardy and the circumstances are the questions that comprise the category, "Things That Divide".

Wagering is an art on Jeopardy. Alex Trebeck asking what someone wants to wager on Double Jeopardy always elicits, "Go for a True Daily Double!" from any Dempsey across the kitchen table. Most often, we're disappointed, even if she's a Botanist and the category is Perennials. Then, we come to Final Jeopardy answer. In only a few situations will I understand why some people bet next to nothing. Especially the college crowd. It seems to me that there's always something to gain and if you lose, well, at least you tried.

What are you wagering in your personal Final Jeopardy? Were the category named "Things that Divide" are you willing to bet that you would left standing after you questioned your role in the great divisions of life?

May we come to understand that diving into the great chasm of difference through ways great and small may be the only way that we will ever be able to defeat the possibility of a life in our personal Sheol. May we come to understand the prophetic voices from the ancients & today who seek to guide us into the open and everlasting arms. Amen.

