

Sunday, September 25, 2022
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 21 (Year C)

Luke 16.19-31

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/660658191928700>

(Sermon begins at about 23:50)

“Failure to Communicate”

In the 1967 prison drama film “Cool Hand Luke,” the prison warden delivers a line that has crept into our cultural lexicon: “What we’ve got here is failure to communicate.” Jesus could just as easily have said these words as a way of summing up today’s Gospel reading. Or words that could have been spoken by Abraham to the rich man. Which he essentially does, only in more theological language.

What we hear today is a parable Jesus tells in response to criticism from the Pharisees regarding Jesus’ teachings on wealth and power. The parable, while providing a blanket statement about the use of wealth and power, specifically targets the Pharisees, who used their wealth and power for their own purposes, often at the expense of, or at least without regard to, the common folk and particularly the poor—those whom they viewed as beneath them. Jesus levels condemnation of them and all those who were more concerned with wealth and power than with following the commandments to care for the poor and marginalized.

As we hear in the parable, in life the rich man had no compassion for Lazarus whatsoever. He didn’t do anything to ease his suffering. He didn’t provide him with a morsel to eat, with scraps from his table—which probably ended up on the trash heap instead. He viewed him with total contempt, as being someone beneath him, unworthy of his attention, if he even bothered to notice him at all. After all, he was a man of great wealth and power. Why should he care about, why should he have anything to do with, a poor beggar? Why should he be bothered to show him any compassion? He was a nobody.

His disregard for Lazarus was so deeply ingrained that it even extended into death. When he dies, he finds there is as much of a separation between him and Lazarus as there was in life. A separation that was of his own making. Just as in life where he chose to separate himself from the likes of Lazarus by ignoring them, now in death he finds that his earthly actions have resulted in yet more separation between him and Lazarus. A separation that is not only a personal disdain, but now one that is a truly physical separation. One that separates him not only from Lazarus, but from God’s realm, as well. Only now, the situation is reversed. Lazarus is comfortable in the heavenly realm—the home of angels and the righteous, exemplified by Abraham, patriarch of the Jewish faith. And the rich man finds himself in Hades, where he was subjected to torment and the flames of Hell.

Despite the tables being turned, the rich man still views Lazarus as beneath him. He begs Abraham, “Have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue.” Interestingly, despite having ignored Lazarus in life, the rich man knows exactly who

this guy is. He even knows his name. Which really just adds insult to injury. The rich man knew him by name, and still did nothing to help him. Which just makes matters even worse, and makes the interaction between Abraham and the rich man—not even deigning to address Lazarus directly—all the more egregious. He knows who Lazarus is, sees him with Abraham, and still shows no respect, continuing to view him as lesser, as beneath him. This speaks volumes about the man’s outlook: that it’s all about him and his own comfort and wellbeing, to the exclusion of others.

Dude, you just don’t get it, do you? You are in no position to be issuing orders here. You had your moment of the good life, of wealth and of power. You even had opportunity to help those less fortunate. But you chose not to. Now all that is over. You are going to have to face the consequences of your actions. Or lack thereof. Not to mention the little matter of a chasm between the good place and the bad place that cannot be crossed.

Throughout this scene, the rich man just does not seem to comprehend why he is on the side of the chasm characterized as a place of torment. Despite Abraham explicitly telling him: “Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony.”

And yet, he still doesn’t get it. If Lazarus can’t do anything for the rich man, at least he can have Lazarus sent to the rich man’s brothers to warn them that they need to change their ways, lest they suffer the same fate. Well, that’s something. Apparently the rich man is capable of compassion, after all. Even if unable—or unwilling—to show compassion for the likes of Lazarus, he is able to show compassion for his brothers, for his peers. Although it is a compassion based on concern for his own, for those like him, not compassion for those most in need of it. Compassion that, by the way, is inherently part of his religion. Inherently part of the commandments that he should have been following throughout his life.

This is certainly implied in Abraham’s response to the rich man’s first request, which he begins by calling the rich man “Child.” This is meant not as a term of endearment but as a subtle reproach. Or maybe not so subtle. Recognition that the rich man was a child of Abraham, a member of the Jewish faith. And yet, one who did not follow the Jewish laws as fully as he should have. A not-so-gentle reminder that ultimately, it is not claiming membership as a good religious person that matters. It is what one does with the claim. It is how one lives into the values of that membership through action: doing justice; showing kindness, love, compassion, and mercy; following God’s commandments.

This is underscored in Abraham’s response to the rich man’s second request to send Lazarus to warn his brothers. “They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.” In other words, we have already been given all that we need to live as God desires us to. God has given his laws through Scripture. And to help us in understanding how to apply those laws, we have examples through the lives of the patriarchs and prophets; of all the faithful who have gone before. What more do you need? All you have to do is listen.

“What we’ve got here is failure to communicate.” As we know, communication is a two-way street. Information is conveyed by one party and received and processed by another party.

Failure to communicate can happen at either or both ends. If someone is unclear on what they say, there is the possibility for communications to fail, or at least be rocky. Even if what is conveyed is done in the clearest, most concise manner, there is, nonetheless, the possibility the party receiving the information fails to fully understand what is being conveyed. Or as is sometimes the case—I'm looking at you rich man—some people just don't want to understand. Perhaps because to do so would point out a failure on their part. Which is certainly the case here.

After saying "What we've got here is failure to communicate," the prison warden in "Cool Hand Luke" follows up by saying "some men you just can't reach." Which we see with the rich man. But the real point of this parable is that some people CAN be reached. According to one commentator, it is important to note "this isn't a treatise on the afterlife. On the contrary, it's a graphic morality tale meant to focus our attention, and if necessary, to rouse us from slumber: Wake up—and listen!"¹ That this side of the grave, it is never too late to hear, it is never too late to change.

As we've talked before, when Jesus tells a parable, he is inviting us to enter into the parable. To see how we fit into the story. To look at who we might be in the parable. That is most definitely true in today's reading. But this parable is told in such a way that we are not placed in the role of Lazarus or in the role of the rich man. Instead, we are meant to take the role of the rich man's siblings. The rich man pleads with Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his family—to warn us. But as we heard, Abraham is very clear: "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them." WE have Moses and the prophets. And we have Jesus. We need to listen to them. Really listen.

Jesus incorporating this detail in the parable firmly reiterates his own position on wealth, generosity, hospitality, and justice as being rooted in Moses and the prophets. As being the foundation of the Jewish tradition, which is, in turn, the foundation of our own Christian tradition. As such, we have all the guidance we need to live faithfully in this life. Any failure to communicate is not on Moses or the prophets. Any failure to communicate is not on Jesus. Rather, failure to communicate is on us. Our job is to listen; to truly listen; and then to live our lives accordingly.

¹ "Listen: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for Sixteenth Week after Pentecost," SALT, September 19, 2022. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/9/24/listen-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-sixteenth-week-after-pentecost>.