

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, September 30, 2007, Pentecost 18, dedicated to Daniel Robert Sitler Ahrens on his 17th Birthday and always to the glory of God!

“Not Convinced?...Try the Resurrected One!”

Jeremiah 32: 1-3a, 6-15, Luke 16:19-31

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Each of us establishes beliefs about certain things and certain people that protect us from the pain of those around us. We convince ourselves that if a certain person had only done this or that, life would have turned out fine. For example: Your sister would have had a good job if she hadn't dated that one guy. Or, your brother would have been a success if hadn't drunk so much.

It is human nature to resolve in our mind that some people are the way they are for certain reasons. We do this so that we can get on with the business of being the way we are without too much wear and tear on our consciences (drawn from Barbara Brown Taylor's *Bread of Angels*, Cowley Publications, Boston, MA, 1997, p. 109).

Most of us realize that we are responsible for ourselves. Like Jesus tells us, we know we are here to love our neighbors. But, we also tell ourselves some of our neighbors could do a lot better for themselves if they would simply pick themselves up by their bootstraps and get on with life. We believe, if they just got into the race of life, they could run and win. But, let's be honest, when you see pictures of the Boston Marathon starting line, you become aware that some runners start so far back in the pack, they'll never even see the dust of the frontrunners. The guy who started first is minutes ahead before you even reach the starting line!

Having worked and lived in urban settings for the last 30 years, I happen to believe that there are folks who cannot simply pull themselves up by the bootstraps. They have no bootstraps. They can't get a job because they have no identification card. They have no money to buy one. In the game of life, no one has given them a copy of the rules. Even if they had one, many of them can't read. Too many people running ahead in life look down their noses at these folks. They treat them as less than human. But, in reality, they, like you and me, are beloved children of God. Their misfortune in life is tied to many things. From the moment they were born and entered the race of life, some of the things that affected them were far beyond their control. Is this what Jesus meant when he said, "The poor will always be with us?" Was he talking about the misfortunes of these folks?

Jesus was always running the race into the wind. When the race gun shot off and the people headed north, Jesus was running south into the flow of the race. For example, back in Jesus' day, there was a popular view (especially among the rich) that God blessed the rich with wealth and cursed the poor with poverty. Folks could find lots of scriptural passages to back them up on this. Deuteronomy 28 promised fertility, prosperity and victory in war to those who obeyed the Lord. Psalm 1 made it clear that God watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked perish. Those who obeyed God were blessed with wealth and prosperity. Those who disobeyed were cursed with poverty (Ibid, p. 109). Jesus had trouble with these beliefs.

In today's parable, Jesus tells us of two men - the rich man (with no name) and the poor man, Lazarus. During his lifetime, Lazarus is homeless and living just outside the rich man's gate. He had open sores that the dogs licked. He competed with the dogs to get scraps from the rich man's table. Meanwhile, the rich man had fine purple linens (a sign of royalty and wealth). He ate sumptuously

every day. Both men die - Lazarus is carried to heaven by angels to be with Abraham. The rich man dies and is carried to Hades where he is tormented.

In eternity, the tables are turned. As the rich man looks to heaven amidst his constant and eternal torment, he sees Lazarus and Abraham happily sitting side by side. He begs for Lazarus to dip his finger in cool water to ease his agony. Before Lazarus can answer, Abraham says, "*Child, you had your good things in life while Lazarus laid in agony on your front steps.*" "*Besides all this,*" Abraham continues, "*between you and us there is a large chasm that has been fixed . . . no one can cross over it.*" Talk about the tables turning! The chasm that the rich say is fixed by God - only in this lifetime! It's the opposite in the next lifetime!

So the rich man tries another approach. Perhaps Lazarus can return to earth and warn his five brothers so they will not end up in hell. But, Abraham points out they have Moses and the prophets to warn them. Yet one more time the rich man cries out that if only they saw someone (like Lazarus) from the world of the dead, they would know that judgement is coming to them and of course they would change. But, Abraham responds, "*If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.*"(16:31)

With this parable, Jesus turns the judgement of scriptures upside down. Essentially Jesus says, "*Moses and the prophets have shown you how to relate to your fellow human beings. Love, kindness, justice, and mercy should guide your daily actions. If you don't do the right thing on earth, prepare for an eternity of hell.*"

Jesus was not interested in teasing and torturing the rich with these stories. What he couldn't stand was when people loved their things better than they loved God and one another. They were satisfied with fine linens and sumptuous feasts when God wanted them to have the Kingdom of Heaven! They were content to live in

a world with beggars and dogs licking the wounds of men when God wanted them to see their brothers and sisters in need. They were content to live with a few passages of scriptures which backed up their health, wealth and prosperity gospels when God wanted to give them a new way of life altogether (*ibid.*, p. 112).

Like then, we can still be victims of our own way of life. We still find ways to cut ourselves off from each other when we learn to live with the misery of other people by convincing us that they deserve what has come their way - and likewise we deserve the good fortune that has come our way.

In this story it is not God who fixes the chasm between heaven and Hell. It is the rich man! But, the story is not over. That is the best part, altogether!

In this story, we are the five brothers. Even though Abraham wouldn't let Lazarus return to warn the five brothers of their certain fate if they do not change, Jesus sneaked this story out for us. Now we have it on the best authority - Moses, the prophets, *Abraham and the ONE who has risen from the dead* - all seeking to convince us it is true.

If you aren't convinced by Moses, the prophets and Abraham that we need to live lives of justice, righteousness, mercy and love for our neighbors - try the resurrected one! He is here to save you! Pay attention. After all, as Nationwide likes to tell us - "Life comes at you fast!" Let's add - "Eternal life comes at you fast, too!" As such, we all need to be reminded - "Jesus Christ is on our side." Amen.

