

## Sundays after Pentecost - Year C [Proper 21C]

September 29, 2019

Haven Lutheran Church

Readings: Psalm 37:1-9; Luke 17:5-10

This is my favorite Pearly Gates joke:

A minister died and went to the Pearly Gates. Resplendent in his clerical collar and colorful robes he's waiting in line and just ahead of him is a guy dressed in sunglasses, a loud shirt, leather jacket, and jeans. Saint Peter addresses this guy, "Who are you, so that I may know whether or not to admit you into heaven?"

The guy replies, "I'm Joe Green, New York City taxi-driver." Saint Peter consults his list, smiles and says to the taxi-driver, "Take this silken robe and golden staff, and enter." So the taxi-driver enters Heaven with his robe and staff.

The minister is next in line. Without being asked, he proclaims, "I am Rev. Michael O'Connor, pastor of Saint Mary's for the last forty-three years." Saint Peter consults his list and says, "Take this cotton robe and wooden staff and enter into heaven."

"Just a minute," says the preacher, "that man was a taxi-driver, and you gave him a silken robe and golden staff. But I get a cotton robe and wooden staff? How can this be?" "Up here, we go by results," says Saint Peter. "When you preached, people slept — when he drove, people prayed."

Scholars tell us that they had "pearly gate stories" in Jesus time, too. They think they originated in Egypt. These first pearly gate stories were a type of folk tale that used ironic reversals to teach a moral truth or right behavior. It seems that Jesus borrowed from that tradition when he told today's parable about the rich man and poor Lazarus. Like the other tales in that Pearly gate genre, the story Jesus tells is not meant to describe the afterlife and its conditions but make a point about how we are to live our lives **now**. Still his point makes most of us as nervous as a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs.

Jesus is very clear that this wealthy man in the parable did not live a life pleasing to God *because* he ignored the hungry and hurting, even when it was at his own door. Jesus

echoes what God had said through Moses and countless prophets — “You who have power and resources, care for the poor and weak, the widow and orphan who are also my beloved children.” In the letter to Timothy we are reminded that it is not money or wealth that are evil in themselves but the “love of money” that is “a root of all kinds of evil” like greed, selfishness, gluttony, envy and the actions to which they lead. The danger of money and wealth is the temptation to care more about it and what it can buy, than to care about others or even God. The rich man in the parable was so enamored with his wealthy lifestyle that he had no heart for a man like Lazarus and no ear to hear God’s call to compassion. He hoarded blessings as if they were his alone, cutting himself off from God and his fellow human beings.

A living, healthy lake is a body of water with both an inlet for receiving water from sources like melted snow, *and* an outlet for water to go out. This ongoing exchange of water—flowing in and out—nurtures a healthy lake environment that then supports all kinds of life. It’s the same flowing motion of life that is seen throughout creation. We breathe in oxygen and release carbon dioxide. We take in foods and fluids to build up body cells, with other systems working to eliminate what is not needed or harmful. Any living system — from a lake to bodies to relationships — needs that dynamic of in and out, take and release in order to remain healthy and life-giving.

In those, healthy systems are endangered when that flow of in and out is blocked. When a lake no longer has a flowing water source at its inlet or its outlet is closed, the water will grow stagnant. Without that flow of water in and out, much of the ecosystem will eventually disappear or die. Stagnation is a threat to much of nature, including our bodies. Stagnation also can endanger economies, government and churches. No new ideas — stuck, stagnant. No willingness to let go of what no longer works — stuck, stagnant. Inlets and outlets, taking in and letting go are essential to life and health. That is what the rich man in today’s parable did not understand.

She may not be able to remember her current address but she remembered Easter of 1946. She said, "I was 14, my little sister Ocy, 12, and my older sister Darlene, 16. We lived at home with our mother, and the four of us knew what it was to do without many things. My dad had died 5 years before, leaving Mom with seven school kids to raise and no money. By 1946 my older sisters were married, and my brothers had left home."

A month before Easter, the pastor of our church announced that a special Easter offering would be taken to help a poor family. He asked everyone to save and give sacrificially. When we got home, we talked about what we could do. We decided to buy 50 pounds of potatoes and live on them for a month. This would allow us to save \$20 of grocery money for the offering. Then we thought that if we kept our electric lights turned out as much as possible and didn't listen to the radio, we'd save money on that month's electric bill. Darlene got as many house and yard cleaning jobs as possible, and both of us baby sat for everyone we could. For 15 cents, we could buy enough cotton loops to make three potholders to sell for \$1. We made \$20 on potholders.

That month was one of the best of our lives. Every day we counted the money to see how much we had saved. At night, we'd sit in the dark and talk about how the poor family was going to enjoy having the money the church would give them. We had about 80 people in church, so we figured that whatever amount of money we had to give, the offering would surely be 20 times that much. Every Sunday the pastor had reminded everyone to save for the sacrificial offering.

The day before Easter, Ocy and I walked to the grocery store and got the manager to give us three crisp \$20 bills and one \$10 bill for all our change. We ran all the way home to show Mom and Darlene. We had never had so much money before. That night we were so excited we could hardly sleep. We didn't care that we wouldn't have new clothes for Easter; we had \$70 for the sacrificial offering. We could hardly wait to get to church.

On Sunday morning, rain was pouring. We didn't own an umbrella and the church was over a mile from our home, but it didn't seem to matter. We sat in church proudly. I

heard some teenagers talking about us Smith girls having on our old dresses. But I was feeling so rich.

When the sacrificial offer was taken, we were sitting on the second row from the front. Mom put in the \$10 bill, and each of us girls put in a \$20. As we walked home after church, we sang all the way. At lunch, Mom had a surprise for us. She brought a dozen eggs, and we had boiled Easter eggs with our friend potatoes. Late that afternoon the minister drove up in his car. Mom went to the door, talked with him for a moment, and then came back with an envelope in her hand. We asked what it was, but she didn't say a word. She opened the envelope and out fell a bunch of money. There were three crisp \$20 bills, one \$10 and seventeen \$1 bills. Mom put the money back in the envelope.

We didn't talk, just sat and stared at the floor. We had gone from feeling like millionaires to feeling like poor white trash. The minister had brought us the money for the poor family, "so we must be poor", I thought for the first time in my life. I looked at my dress and worn out shoes and felt so ashamed that I didn't want to go back to church... or school. We sat in silence for a long time. Then it got dark, and we went to bed. All that week, we girls went to school and came home, and no one talked much. Finally, on Saturday, Mom asked us what we wanted to do with the money. We didn't know. We didn't want to do to go to church on Sunday, but Mom said we had to. Although it was a sunny day, we didn't talk on the way. Mom started to sing, but no one joined in and she only sang one verse.

At church, we had a missionary speaker. He talked about how churches in Africa made buildings out of sun-dried bricks, but they need money to buy roofs. He said \$100 would put a roof on a church. The minister said, "Can't we all sacrifice to help these poor people?"

We looked at each other and smiled for the first time in a week. Mom reached into her purse and pulled out the envelope. She passed it to Darlene. Darlene gave it to me, and I handed it to Ocy. Ocy put it in the offering. When the offering was counted, the

minister announced that it was little over \$100. The missionary was excited. He hadn't expected such a large offering from our small church. He said, "You must have some rich people in this church." Suddenly it struck us! We had given \$87 of that "little over \$100." WE were the rich family in the church. Hadn't the missionary said so? From that day on I've never been poor again."<sup>1</sup>

"God gives to us generously, including financially. If you and I want to be healthy and not spiritually stagnant, we need to learn to be stewards that "go with the flow". Financial blessing, talents and gifts are not just meant to come to us but to flow *through* us to others."<sup>2</sup> When speaking about charitable giving and living, Martin Luther wrote: "God divided our hands into fingers so money could slip through them." He wasn't advocating waste or glorifying poverty. He was teaching about the flow of God's goodness and love to us and sent into the world through us. God is the source of our life and blessings. The rich man took all his blessings and kept them for himself. Not even a crust for Lazarus. Not even acknowledgment of his existence. Blessing poured into the rich man's life but he let nothing flow through him to others. That's not life as God created it. It's not the way of the Kingdom of God.

Healthy or stagnant? Shut down or a living stream of blessing? At the end of today's parable, we're left to wonder what the rich man's five brothers will choose. We're left to wonder because Jesus is putting the same question to us. Healthy or stagnant? Shut down or living streams of blessing? We have been invited to live abundant and generous lives... to be flowing streams of God's grace and mercy. That's who we were baptized to be. And through the One who was raised from that death, we are both able and empowered to share water, love, and good news with all those in need. What will we choose, Jesus asks. Most of us worry that we will not have enough. We worry so much that we no longer know what enough is. Trusting in the goodness and generosity of God allows us to prayerfully grow back to being living, flowing waters of God's grace and gifts. By letting go we make room for something more God wants us to have. It's the way of true living, Jesus tells us

today in his pearly gate story. We have Moses, the prophets and even someone who was raised from the dead, what will we decide? Stagnation or a living faith that speaks to all parts of our lives? Jesus waits for our answer each day and I think you can hear him saying, "Choose life... choose the way of life."

Linda M Alessandri

## ENDNOTES

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1. Eddie Ogan, "The Rich Family in Our Church" posted by Keith Larson 1/25/1999
  2. Alex Gondola, "Rich Man, Poor Man, Beggarman, Thief" posted on [www.goodpreacher.com](http://www.goodpreacher.com)