

## Proper 21, Year C: 26 September 2010

Well, you can always tell when the church is gearing up for a pledge campaign, because the lections start talking about the evils of personal wealth!

Here's that ignorant rich man again,  
roasting in hell, getting what he deserves.  
I could go on in this vein, bashing the rich.  
It can be kinda fun.

But that's really not where I want this sermon to go.  
I want to reflect instead on the connection of peace with economic justice.

So let me start by saying, peace is not just the absence of war,  
it is the presence of justice.

This is similar to John Paul XXIII's famous dictum that  
"If you want peace, work for justice."

These are not just liberal catch-phrases,  
not the rallying cry of leftist or socialist rabble-rousers.  
It's simply a stated truth.

If there is no justice, there can be no peace. X2

Right off, I suppose in a sermon with the words economics and justice in it,  
you might assume I would be quoting statistics  
about how economically unequal we are in this country and state.

The problem is, where do you start and where do you end?

I could talk about the folly of our increasingly regressive tax system.

I could talk about the way we are losing  
the opportunities for health care for all of us.

I could quote statistics about how our actual income  
has gone down from the past thirty years  
while the wealth of our nation has gone up.

I could talk about who gains and who loses in the war on terror.

How about the economics of elections  
and who is beholden to whom when an election is won?

How about the struggle to make ends meet for a lot of us?

What about the struggles of people who are homeless and the fact  
that there is again little or no money available for opening up additional shelter space,  
let alone affordable housing?

We don't need statistics to tell us that the economy is messed up.

All of us know plenty about economics. It consumes us.  
It becomes the focal point of our lives,  
where we spend our energy—it becomes our god.

*This sermon was written by The Rev. Theo Park and delivered at Christ Episcopal Church, Red Wing.  
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Think of the oxymoron that the statement on our money is “In God we trust”.  
What these notes say is, in the US Treasury we trust.  
This is not a religious symbol. It’s an idolatrous symbol.  
It’s a symptom of our disease—  
our dependence upon this demi-god who offers no ultimate security.  
I think that what we say more accurately, is “We trust THIS god.”

If we were to say in God we trust,  
might we be doing something about economic justice?  
Might we have some different priorities as a people?

Traditionally, today’s scripture has been used to lift up the holiness of the poor.  
We realize that most of us gathered here are not poor,  
so we convince ourselves that we could never be that holy  
because of all of our stuff.  
Yet what this scripture really is is an indictment on uncaring richness.  
This is a theme we find a lot in Luke.

Luke is where Mary sings about the mighty  
being taken down from their thrones,  
the hungry being filled with good things and the rich being sent away empty.

It is Luke who tells the story of the Good Samaritan  
who pays the hospital bill of the abused foreigner—his sworn enemy—  
who was ignored by the good religious folk.

In Luke, Jesus tells the rich young ruler  
to sell all he has and give to the poor *first* and then come and follow him.  
The implication is that he cannot really follow Jesus  
until he gets rid of the other god in his life.

In Luke, Jesus says, “Blessed are you who are poor...but woe to you who are rich.  
Blessed are you who are hungry now,  
for you will be filled and woe to you who are full now for you will be hungry...”

And in Luke just a few verses before today’s scripture,  
last week we were told “You cannot serve two masters.”  
You need to make your choice.  
Do you worship God or do you worship wealth?

It is to illustrate this concept that Jesus tells the story of the rich man and Lazarus.  
Tradition calls the rich man Dives—that’s simply Latin for “Rich Man”.  
Dives wore fine clothes and ate sumptuously at every meal.  
Meanwhile, poor Lazarus was waiting at his gate  
for whatever scraps of food there might have been.  
Lazarus was never allowed in the gate.  
His sores made him unclean and his condition meant that he was close to death.

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The story goes that when they both died, they got their just reward.  
Lazarus ended up in Abraham's bosom and Dives ended up in torment.  
What's interesting is that from the story, we don't know if Lazarus was righteous in life.  
We do know that Dives had wealth and had kept Lazarus on the other side of the gate.  
Realize that Dives isn't in hell in this story.  
The concept of hell was actually a later Christian development.  
Dives was in Hades, which was a place of torment  
where you had the opportunity to repent of your transgressions in life.  
But Dives doesn't repent.  
In fact, he exposes the length and breadth of his ignorance about what it is to be faithful.

This is where it gets really interesting to me.  
Did you mark that Dives recognizes Lazarus?  
He even knows his name. And yet, he never gave him anything.  
Even in Hades he doesn't recognize Lazarus' humanity.  
He assumes that Lazarus is Abraham's servant.  
Dives never gave Lazarus anything in life  
and yet he expects Lazarus to serve him in death.  
But there is a chasm between them, not unlike the gate to Dives' earthly mansion  
that held Lazarus at bay.  
This chasm is both literal and figurative.

Poor Dives doesn't get it.  
He calls Abraham "father" but doesn't recognize Lazarus as his brother.  
Dives is simply confused and never repents.

Dives then beseeches Abraham to let him warn his own brothers.  
But Abraham tells him that they have had their warning.  
It's called the Torah and the Prophets—the Bible.  
They have had all the warning they need.

Hear this: Dives isn't in torment because he was rich.  
He is in torment because he doesn't care.  
Evangelist Tony Campolo writes that he has many times preached a sermon  
that included the phrase that goes something like this:  
"Two thirds of the world is starving while we sit in relative luxury as a nation  
and most of you don't give a damn.  
And the worst part of it is that you are more concerned  
that I just said "damn" from the pulpit  
than the fact that two thirds of the world is starving."

There is a chasm in our world and it is growing by leaps and bounds.  
It ridicules or appropriates justice to serve its own means.  
It is the gap between not only the rich and the poor  
but between the uncaring and the poor.  
This me-firstism is what Jesus was speaking against.  
It flies in the face of any possibility of equity or justice in the world.

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Jesus wants us to recognize the Lazaruses out there.  
They have something to teach us,  
not about their lives so much as about our lives  
and how we are intertwined and interconnected.  
Until we can see Lazarus as a brother,  
we will continue to be at war with ourselves and with our world.

Just who is Lazarus?

Lazarus might be the bum on the street.  
Or the crazy person smelling up our hallways.  
Or the Iraqi or Afghani child hit by collateral damage in our bombing campaigns.  
Lazarus is a person with AIDS here and across the world.  
Lazarus is a Somali activist,  
a migrant worker  
a prisoner in a relocation camp  
An addict  
A teenage mother  
A pregnant youth  
A person suffering from the demons of depression and despondency  
A farmer in Goodhue in debt up to her eyeballs  
A mother in Indonesia holding a photo of her child  
hoping someone has seen her  
A person in an abusive relationship  
All of these people are Lazarus.

Our work as followers of Jesus is to remember that God loves all of them.  
I don't think we all need to be sign-carrying protesters shouting for "justice!"  
The challenge for us is to listen to the still small voice of God in our hearts,  
who's *not* shouting "Justice!"—although this is of foremost importance to God—  
but instead is whispering, "Were you fair to your brother?  
Did you hurt your sister's feelings?"  
And then to recognize the subtle nudging of the Holy Spirit  
reminding us that there will be no peace until we make it right.

We don't even begin to be on the journey to economic justice  
until we see Lazarus as our brother.  
When we do that, then there no longer is a stranger at the gate.  
There no longer is a hopeless chasm.  
There no longer is an immobile sense of me-first-ism.  
For we have connected with the true God.  
And when we do that, our creative energies are unleashed  
and as we ask the right questions, we start finding the right answers.

*Adapted with gratitude from a sermon written by The Rev. Douglas M. Donley,  
University Baptist Church 2005*

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