

**Homily, St. Andrew's
Proper 26C, Sept 25, 2016
Luke 16:19-31**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

One of the verses that we no longer sing to a popular Anglican hymn is: "The rich man in his castle; the poor man at his gate; God made them high and lowly; And ordered their estate... [sing!] All things bright and beautiful; all creatures great and small; all things wise and wonderful; the Lord God made them all..." There in the middle of a upbeat praise song celebrating the fullness of the created order as God's own doing, there was a verse about the rich and poor in their proper place... the rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate. It implies, rather strongly, that the social order of the time and place of its composition (19th century England) is as much a part of God's creation as trees and seasons.

The great irony is that while that particular musical verse was the first thing I thought of when I read our Gospel story for today... it seems to miss the point entirely! The biblical story begins as the verse does: "There was a rich man..." who dresses and eats very well. "And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus..." who was sick and hungry. But the similarities end with the descriptions of the 2 main characters. As the Gospel story continues, both men die and we hear that their eternal fates are as different as their earthly lives were. The poor man is carried away by the angels to be with Abraham while the rich man is buried and tormented in Hades. We don't need to worry about what the images mean in any concrete sense... we don't need to worry if it's literally true or not. What matters is the contrast of the images and the reversal of fates of the 2 men.

The now-suffering rich man calls out for help... "send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue..." I'm in agony! And contrary to everything we believe about God, instead of receiving mercy, he is chastised: "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..." The man seems to accept his fate far faster than I would... I would argue more... but this formerly-rich man instead thinks about the family he loves, begging: "send [Lazarus] to my father's house - for I have five brothers - that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment." It's a good idea, a caring request... and yet it too is denied: "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them." Finally the rich man protests... trying again... "But if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent." And still the verdict is firm: "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." And there the story ends, leaving us to imagine the future for ourselves... Do the brothers change their ways? Do they wake up and pay attention to what is right in front of their noses? For that, it seems to me, is the point of the verdict.

The most obvious way the rich man needed to pay attention was to Moses and prophets. In other words, he needed to pay attention to God and God's teaching. It is simple to say "read the bible"... we've all heard it and probably many of us feel guilty that we don't do it enough. But the call to pay attention to God and God's teaching is about more than just reading. It is

about struggling to understand what we read, and letting it penetrate our hearts and minds and souls to afflict and to comfort us in turn. Abraham's point to the suffering rich man was that he and his brothers already had what they needed in Moses and the prophets and if they weren't interested or willing to pay attention to it, then no fancy resurrection miracle would help. If we are determined to not know, to not understand, to not follow... then no spectacular or supernatural experience of God is going to help.

As important as it is to pay attention to God and God's teaching, it isn't enough. The rich man also needed to pay attention to the poor and suffering man at his gate. In other words, he needed to pay attention to the world, and the people, around him. This can be more difficult than it first appears because so much about the world around us is often not as we would like. It regularly does not match up with what we think ought to be. People around us think, dress, behave in ways we don't agree with. Worse, the more attention we pay to the people and the world around us, the more likely we are to witness their pain and suffering. Whether it's those who are sick over at Foothills, or children dying in airstrikes in Aleppo, or everything and anything in between, near and far there is plenty that we may wish to shut out. If the rich man saw Lazarus at all, perhaps he told himself that what he saw wasn't really real... that Lazarus was just acting hungry, pretending, to get something for nothing... that the sores weren't really so bad. Or perhaps he justified the situation, saying to himself that Lazarus was hungry and sick because of some personal, individual failing. Maybe the rich man was afraid that if he truly saw Lazarus, he would feel something of the sick and hungry man's pain. Maybe the rich man was pretending he didn't see, even as he stepped over him when he came and went.

As important as it is to pay attention to God and to pay attention to the world around us, there is also a third part needed for the rich man to have done something differently. The rich man also needed to pay attention to himself. He had to notice that he already had everything he needed, indeed, that he had more than enough to offer generosity and kindness to someone else. It is easier to deny who we are and what we have than it may appear at first glance. There is always someone with more... more money, more power, more responsibility. And there is always someone with less... less money, less health, less intelligence. I once heard a wise man describe self-knowledge as the highest form of knowledge. There is nothing harder than seeing ourselves clearly, without thinking too highly or too lowly of ourselves. Paying attention to ourselves - acknowledging our dreams and our disappointments, our giftedness and our struggles, our feelings and our beliefs, is a necessary part of being in relationship. If we don't pay attention to ourselves, then we can't know where we end and where others and where God begin.

Like our theological conceptions of the Holy Trinity as a relationship between 3 distinct persons yet of the same substance, there is also a necessary dance between paying attention to ourselves, paying attention to others and paying attention to God. The dance involves letting what we observe and acknowledge in one part affect the others. The transformation can start anywhere... if our rich man today had truly acknowledged the teaching of Moses and the prophets, perhaps he would have better been able to see his own giftedness. If he had really seen Lazarus at his gate, perhaps God's teaching would have become more alive. If he had deeply understood who he was, perhaps he would have been more free to see the need around him and more empowered to do something about it.

Paying attention is a spiritual practice we can cultivate in our lives. All it takes is a little time and a little courage. We are in the midst of paying attention to God's teaching... Let's also take a moment to pay attention in other ways right now... Take a deep breath, close your eyes and attend to your soul and body. Notice if you're feeling tired or full of energy? Notice the new ache or the absence of a familiar pain strangely absent. What hope or fear, obligation or joy got you out of bed today? When you take a moment to really pay attention, what is your body or soul telling you this morning? [take a few moments of silence...]

Now open your eyes and look around... you might even need to stand up to see the people around you. What do you see? Notice the person whose name you don't know... notice the familiar friend who has a new haircut. Who is not where they should be? Who is absent today? What differences in the building, the space or the people around you do you notice? When you take a moment to really pay attention, what do you see around you?

In the book *An Altar in the World*, Barbara Brown Taylor writes about everyday spirituality, largely in response to the widespread hunger she notices in the world for... something. Something more... a hidden treasure. The second of twelve practices she explores in this everyday journey is that of paying attention. "The practice of paying attention," she writes, "is as simple as looking twice at people and things you might just as easily ignore." (33) This practice, like so many of the practices she writes about, has the power to transform because it calls us to live radically in the present - in our immediate surroundings and indeed in our own bodies... and in doing so, discover reverence for the God who created and loves it all. Paying attention is ultimately, she contends, about nourishing reverence.

Barbara Brown Taylor's *An Altar in the World* offers great insight in simple stories and I wonder if you are interested in reading it and/or studying it together. If you're interested, I've put a sign-up sheet on the board out in the narthex...

This week, may you stop at least once each day and take a moment to pay attention... to yourself, to who and what is happening around you, and to what God might have to teach through its interaction. As you practice paying attention, may you deepen your sense of reverence for God and God's creative work around and within us. In doing so, may you know a little bit of heaven.