

Year C
Proper 21
Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15
Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16
1 Timothy 6:6-19
Luke 16:19-31

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Most of you know that we started discussing *The Book of Joy* in adult forum today, which is a book of conversations between the Dalai Lama, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu about finding lasting joy in life. What these two spiritual leaders embody, and really what most world religions teach, is that focusing on the wellbeing of others, having compassion for their suffering, and responding with kindness is the way to genuine, lasting happiness and joy. Even in the midst of war, apartheid, exile, and all of the other traumatic experiences of their lives, these two men have found that focusing on others, and not on their own suffering, was the way to live that brought the most meaning, and the least suffering to themselves.

In today's gospel we see the results of exactly the opposite of this. Jesus's parable about Lazarus and the Rich Man shows a rich man who "was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day." Certainly by society's standards, this man has everything he could want. In contrast, there is a beggar at the city gate "covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table." Again, by every standard, this man has nothing to be happy about. And Jesus gives the story a little ironic twist by naming this character Lazarus, which means "one whom God has helped." I imagine most of us would identify with the rich man as the story begins, but once the two characters die, and Lazarus "was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham," and the rich man goes to eternal torment, we begin to realize the point of the story.

Lazarus, we learn, lived all of his life on earth with no physical comfort, no things to make his life worth living, while the rich man received every good thing. And because during that time the rich man focused on himself, and not on the needs of others (like poor Lazarus), he's being punished now. And he understands that now, but now it's too late. There is no way that Father Abraham can help him, because of the geography of hell, apparently—there's this huge chasm they can't cross. And also because this is a justice issue. It wouldn't be right, for instance, to ask Lazarus to bring water to the rich man. Then, when the rich man asks for help, for his five brothers who are still living, Abraham reminds him that Moses and the prophets repeatedly and clearly taught about the importance of helping the poor, and having compassion for the needy. The rich man's brothers need only pay attention to their own religious teachings. However, knowing how little attention he himself paid to those same religious teachings, the rich man explains that if Lazarus goes to his brothers "from the dead," they will surely repent. And then with dripping irony, Jesus has Abraham say, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." Jesus knows that, even after he himself rises from the dead, there will be many people who do not believe what *he* is teaching.

This compassion for the poor, for the suffering, and the impulse to do something to help them, is part of what the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu are talking about. When we realize that we are all humans—we are all connected—we should be moved to compassion and to action. In fact, the only lasting happiness, lasting joy, that we can have is through compassion and kind action for others. God has actually created us this way. Study after study has shown that people who “live to give” are happier, healthier, live longer, and are more satisfied with their lives. In their book *The Wonder Drug*, two doctors, Steven Trzeclak, and Anthony Mazzairelli, cite recent research that shows how the pleasure centers of brain actually light up when people think compassionate thoughts. Then, when we do kind actions, like giving to charity, volunteering, or saying kind things, we get that little shot of dopamine which makes us feel good. Over time, compassion and giving to others actually reduces people’s pain, and improves depression.

So if we’ve actually been created to live in community, and to have compassion, and to give to one another, why don’t we do it all the time? Why would there ever be a situation like the one where Lazarus is lying sick, starving and impoverished by the city gate? It’s because our culture tells us that we always need to acquire more. And our culture also encourages us to pursue hedonism—physical pleasures like food, alcohol, and sex, or the acquisition of status symbols, or simply more money. If that’s what we focus on, then the economy is healthy, and then we can have more stuff. But getting stuff, and pleasing our senses is not what God has designed us for. God has designed us to love God, and to love one another. Our brains, our bodies, and society function best when we do this. Science tells us that.

And, interestingly, so does the apostle Paul. His letter to Timothy works with that same idea. For instance, he discourages the acquisition of money and stuff, “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.” Notice that Paul doesn’t say that money is the root of all kinds of evil—no, it’s the LOVE of money that is the problem. When we love money more than God, or more than one another, THAT is the problem. Money, as we know, is necessary to survive. But if becoming rich is all that we think about, it will only lead to unhappiness, because then we never seem to have enough money. And it’s easy to forget about others, and their needs, when money is the main focus.

But what if someone is already rich? Is that bad? Not at all—Paul says, “As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.” It’s as if Paul had read the books I mentioned. Being generous, not obsessing about “the uncertainty of riches,” indulging in good works, sharing: all of these things create a mind and a spirit that is joyful. God created us to live this way. The challenge is to discipline ourselves to do it. If we can live to give, we will be happier, healthier, and closer to God. Amen.

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