

Sunday, September 29, 2013
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – “Be Still and Notice”

For today’s New Testament reading we return to the lectionary and the gospel of Luke.

We find Jesus, once again, using a story to make his point.

Money and the use of material possessions is a theme of the lessons this week.

This is a regular concern of Scripture, but in particular of the Gospel of Luke.

For Luke, how we use money is a barometer of our spiritual life and health.

Reading from the book of Luke 16:29-31.

Often, when I read a scripture passage, I try to discern its meaning by assuming the different vantage points of the characters in the story.

I find that it gives me a deeper understanding of the amazing complexity of what might seem to be the simplest stories.

Here, today, we have the unnamed rich man and Lazarus, the poor man.

We also have Abraham as a commentator – narrating the events, providing the backstory.

That might seem to be it – however, the characters that resonate with me in this passage are the five brothers at home who have Moses and the Prophets to inform their lives.

This is where I find myself.

I hope that I am not the indifferent rich man, and I do not feel that I am the invisible poor man – but I can see myself in the role of the informed believer who knows and understands about God’s love, but perhaps does not always choose to live that out.

The scriptures provide us with an opportunity to examine our own lives in the context, (through the lens), of the biblical characters.

Stories – whether personal narratives, parables, or fictitious tales give us a window into other people’s lives.

Jesus tells stories to make a point.

Today’s story can be interpreted several ways.

One, perhaps the most obvious, is to focus on money.

There is no question that the Bible has a lot to say about money and how we use it.

Our use of money is rooted in our attitude toward it.

One commentator wrote “When we work to develop the Christ-like attitudes of humility, contentment, simplicity and love, we will automatically see our money not as an end in itself, or a source of security

and happiness, but as a means to the end of building community, of seeking to spread blessing and sufficiency as widely as possible, and of manifesting the life of Jesus in our world.”

As we grow in understanding our call to build God’s kingdom on earth, we inevitably find ourselves becoming increasingly compassionate and generous.

We discover that whatever we possess, no matter how much or how little, can make a contribution to building God's Dream among us.

The parable today does not blame or condemn the rich man for his wealth.

The blame lies in that he denied Lazarus even the scraps from his table.

The excess that he would not use and did not care about was kept from someone whose life would have been changed by it.

It is the lack of compassion and kindness that Jesus is calling attention to.

This past week, I had the opportunity to hear Reverend Kirk B. Jones lecture on his new book: *Fulfilled: Living and Leading with Unusual Wisdom, Peace, and Joy*.

Dr. Jones’ identifies his vocational focus as “helping people, leaders, churches, and other organizations unleash their innate capacity for continual creative vitality through stillness, awareness, and playfulness.”

“Stillness” he says, “brings peace. Awareness breeds wisdom. Playfulness gives birth to joy.”

One of the points made in the lectures was how effectively Jesus embraced these practices of stillness, awareness, and playfulness.

Today’s passage gives us the opportunity to discern how we might deal with the situation at hand, employing at least two of these practices.

First, stillness.

Abraham tells the rich man that his five brothers have access to the prophets and the teaching of Moses, so that they ought to know how to act.

We, too, have access to the teachings of Moses and the prophets *and* Jesus *and* the disciples.

One of the best ways to remind ourselves of what we already know is to be still.

Our psalm today reminded us that God is our refuge and our fortress, the one in whom we put our trust.

Similarly, Psalm 46 reminds us “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.”

This particular psalm goes on to describe the majesty and power of God in addressing the problems of the world, and ends with these words,

“Be still and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth.”

Be still – turn to God for help and let God be God.

There is tremendous freedom in that.

Our world lacks in opportunities for stillness and quiet.

It is amazing how much information we take into our minds every minute of the day.

We are barraged with:

environmental stimuli – things happening around us;

emotional stimuli – thoughts and feelings about our relationships;

physical stimuli – how we feel on any given day;

and what I call heart-stimuli – the things that we worry about – good and bad – our family's well being, our relationships.

Dr. Brown defined stillness as the “cessation of inner churning.”

Just imagine that for a moment.

Imagine your mind, , your heart, your soul, your stomach being completely free of churning.

Be still.

Be still and let the scriptures speak to you over the ages.

Listen to what your ancestors are saying.

Be still.

The second strategy Dr. Jones recommends is one that speaks directly to our reading today: awareness.

Noticing of both the inner life and outer life.

How much do you notice?

How much attention do you pay to those around you?

How about to the voice inside you?

Where were you this week? Did you eat out? Did you visit someone in a hospital? Were you somewhere that used housekeeping services? Did you eat pickled, processed, or packed foods? Did you get a clothing "good buy?"

In your activities, were you aware of the people working, perhaps without a livable wage?

Today's text certainly speaks to the importance of noticing those around us.

Abraham's admonition to the rich man is not for his wealth, but for failure to notice Lazarus lying at his doorstep.

The sins of entitlement, self-importance and self-centeredness can creep into our being, often without notice.

Even in death, the rich man's attitude remained unchanged.

He still expected Lazarus to serve him by bringing him water, and for his family to receive special treatment by having someone return from the dead to speak to them.

Jesus uses this story not to expound on what happens when we die but on how we live in this life and, in particular, how we use our resources and treat others.

As we grow in understanding our call to build God's kingdom on earth, we inevitably find ourselves becoming increasingly compassionate and generous, and we discover that whatever we possess can make a significant contribution to building God's Dream among us.

Noticing takes energy.

When you notice someone's situation, reaction, or emotions you instantly engage in relationship.

The benefit of this is enormous.

When your heart is filled with kindness, you feel less stress – less worry.

Jesus tells the tale of the rich man's indifference to the poor man to remind us that there is always someone who needs us – who could use our help.

Compassion is about awareness.

We are about compassion.

This week, our annual Every Member Canvass letters will go out. You will be asked to contribute, to pledge your support, for the work of our church.

There are so many ways that we can talk about responsibility for support of the church and all of the ministries we take on.

But I think that the most important way to address this is to simply say that the church exists to shine a light into the world's darkness.

We are here to offer compassion to our neighbor and we do that – all of us – through worship, education and service.

Let us heed the lesson that Jesus has provided this morning and ensure that we do not emulate the five brothers at home who need to be told to notice the poor man at their doorstep.

Let us join together to build up the church of Christ – the church of compassion.