Year C Proper 21

Amos 6:1a, 4-7

Psalm 146

1 Timothy 6:6-19

Luke 16:19-31

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Often critical discoveries are made when people are facing a crisis or a problem that requires a different way of doing things. Such was the case in 1978 in Columbia when doctors in the neonatal ICU were facing a shortage of incubators. Because of a lack of resources, they experimented by having the mothers swaddle their preterm infants onto their chest, skin to skin, in imitation of the way marsupials carry their babies. What has come to be called Kangaroo Care was found to result in better temperature regulation, better cardio and lung regulation, better pain management, better sleep patterns, better neurological development, better growth, and better maternal bonding than those receiving the standard incubator care. The difference was so remarkable that using Kangaroo Care for at least one hour a day is being practiced in many hospitals even in countries where resources are readily available. The importance of this skin to skin contact from birth even in very premature babies has dramatically measurable benefits even ten years after birth.

The sense that is most fully developed in premature babies is the sense of touch. I can’t help but wonder if it is through this skin to skin contact that the baby is able to know it is loved and valued. Could it be that this is why they thrive? Could it be that all the physiological benefits come from that inner awareness that they are loved and of a great worth? The same issue seemed to be demonstrated in the reverse in hospitals and orphanages throughout the world where infants were experiencing neglect. They developed many problems ranging from depression to a more global failure to thrive. This need to know you are loved and valued is so deeply woven into our DNA that it seems to be at the very root of our wellbeing.

However, it isn’t just in infants and children. Studies have found that seniors live longer when they are not alone, when they have someone with whom they have a loving relationship even if that someone is only a pet. When a person of any age feels valued, feels they are needed and loved, they are more likely to thrive.

I’m sure this is no surprise to anyone as we’ve all experienced this, if only in some small way ourselves. God’s word is full of reminders of how much God loves us, how much value we are to the Lord-that we are of great worth, that we matter and have a purpose in life. But it’s not enough to read it on the pages of Scripture. We need to be affirming this truth to one another, to be living it out in the way we treat others. We need to be speaking this truth into the lives of those others-especially those who need to hear it the most, who are feeling forgotten, of no worth, unloved and unlovable. Often those feelings are being experienced,

even by those we would least expect All of us have the need to know we are loved and are of great worth.

We see this at the root of the parable Jesus told. At the root of the misery Lazarus is living in is the sense of being unloved and unvalued. Certainly he is hungry and miserable in his physical distress, but the greatest pain is that one who easily has the means to do something about it who walks by him every time he comes and goes from his house doesn’t consider him even worth his notice. He is as nothing to him.

The Parable of the Rich man and Lazarus is not simply a parable about a rich man failing to share his wealth or even about him failing to feed the poor man at his gate. It is not a criticism of all who are rich. Abraham was rich and he figures prominently in the parable as one highly favored by God. The problem is that the rich man has failed to recognize the poor man at his gate as having any worth and to treat him as such. He is a Jew who would have known the Words of Scripture but the call to treat those in need with compassion or to use his wealth as a blessing to others does not seem to have made it either to his head or to his heart. It is a warning to those who have been unwilling to heed the call of the scripture.

In this parable Jesus was speaking to the Pharisees who believed money was a sign of God’s favor and poverty was a result of God’s curse. Jesus worked very hard to help them understand this was a dangerous lie. The Pharisees were full of themselves and their own self-importance and entitlement. They had no sense of responsibility or concern for the poor. The concept that to whom much is given much is expected was lost on the Pharisees. Jesus turns on end the idea that money is a sign of God’s favor. It is a gift that is accompanied by a responsibility to use it to honor God and bless others, not for self-indulgence.

Significantly, the rich man in the story is nameless but the poor man has a name. His name is Lazarus which means, “God has helped.” He is the only character given a name in all of the parables of Jesus. Clearly God considers him of value even if the rich man does not.

The rich man in the story has great wealth. His clothes are made of purple fabric, so costly that it is associated with the clothing of royalty. His undergarments were made of soft fine linen, and his life was characterized by merriment and feasting. He enjoyed a happy and easy life. The gate of his home where Lazarus sat every day was not a gate like the one leading into our courtyard garden. The word used here for gate indicates a very large gate or portico like that of a city or palace. His house was a very grand one. It was not only within his means to care for Lazarus but he could easily have done so without any sacrifice to his own way of life. But the rich man failed to even pay him any notice. He would have had to walk by Lazarus each day but rather than having compassion he chose to ignore him. Lazarus had no worth or value to him. Even the dogs who licked his wounds treated him with more compassion. Only the dogs seemed to recognize him as a person of worth.

It’s not that the rich man was an evil person. But he lived only for himself. He was only concerned with himself and only mindful of his own self-worth. He couldn’t see or honor the value of the poor man who sat at his gate. This was the sin that condemned him and it remained unchanged even after he died. Even when he was in hell in torment and could see Lazarus in heaven he didn’t get it. “Won’t you send Lazarus over here to wait on me and relieve me of my suffering? He asked. Still he thinks he can summon Lazarus, seeing him only as one to serve his own needs. Even now he considers himself superior to Lazarus. He has learned nothing.

However God is rewarding Lazarus as one of great worth. Lazarus has not complained of his lot in life nor does he gloat when he is in heaven and the rich man is suffering. He simply accepts his lot in life. Now he has been elevated to a place of honor at the heavenly banquet at the right hand of Abraham as indicated by his head resting on his bosom as it would have done reclining at table beside him. While he suffered terribly in his life on earth, he has received his heavenly reward.

The rich man’s request that someone go to warn his brothers is as much a defense for his own behavior, a self-justification, as it is concern for his brothers. If I had only known, he is saying, I would have behaved differently. But Jesus is saying that if a person cannot respond with compassion with the Old Testament in hand and one such as Lazarus on his doorstep nothing will teach him otherwise, even if one were to come back from the dead. Jesus knows that even the resurrection will not be enough to convince those who have hardened their hearts toward God’s love and the message of His Word.

This parable is a warning that our destiny in the life to come depends on what we do in the here and now. What we do with what we have been given matters for all eternity. We are stewards of what we have, we are blessed to be a blessing. We are to love others as we have been loved, to forgive others as we have been forgiven, to bless others as we have been blessed, to extend to others the grace that has been extended to us. One has come back from the dead. He has not only called us to repent and to return to the Lord but has made it possible for us to be transformed by dying on the cross to break the hold of sin on our lives and transform us with his love. Because of Jesus that chasm of sin that separates us from God has been overcome and we are restored to that intimate relationship with God that is pictured by Lazarus leaning on the bosom of Abraham.

Worship is what we do when we ascribe worth to God. But it’s also when God ascribes worth to us. Our value is not because of the standards of the world but because of who we are in God. It’s because he has made us for himself and has created us for his purpose. When we worship we encounter the Spirit of God who has expressed his love for us in the offering of his son who poured out his life for us so that we might have eternal life, so that we might live even now in the kingdom of God where we know just how much he loves us. In worship we enter into the embrace of God who speaks into us, “You are my precious child, my beloved. You are of great worth.” Having encountered our God who loves and cherishes us in our worship, we are sent forth by God to express that love to others to recognize and speak into their lives God’s love for them, treating them as people of worth, seeking to bless them in their needs in whatever way God is calling us to bless them.

Amen.