

Sermon
St. Mary's Nanoose
September 25, 2016.
Luke 16:19-31

This past week I've been away at a Wisdom School; a form of retreat with an equal balance of prayer and teaching. The beauty of this kind of time away, or time apart, is that it provides the space and support for opening one's eyes to new seeing and opening one's heart to deeper wisdom.

The intention of the reading of Luke (The Rich Man and Lazarus) this morning is to do the same - to wake us up to see more clearly the condition of our lives and to move our hearts to act compassionately.

Some people interpret this passage literally as evidence that there is a hell. But surely this is too simple. It might be our desire for justice that makes us want there to be a hell as punishment for those people who seem to get away with murder. Haven't you heard people say, "There must be a special place in Hell for that person!"?

But there are two kinds of hell described in this parable. One kind of hell is when you are helpless to change the situation. The poor man Lazarus is living in Hell as he lies half-starved by the gate of a wealthy man. Isn't it Hell when the resources needed to make your life manageable are denied you?

Another kind of hell is when you come to your senses and discover how your action, or lack of action, has hurt another person, or a group of people. And how your actions have drawn you into a kind of self imprisonment. This is the case of the rich man who wakes up to find himself

alone. In this turn of events he discovers that, stripped of his wealth and power, he has no one. He experiences the isolation he created through his self-protection and buffering himself from those hurting individuals in his own community.

This harkens back to last week's story from Luke about the dishonest manager who was commended for his decision to use his fall from grace as an opportunity to start building relationship with those he had cheated.

Today's lesson is of a similar nature. But it is a more intense wake up call. In this parable there are no second chances. The rich man in Hell not only cannot access comfort for himself, but is unable to warn his family who are obviously also engaged in a self-serving lifestyle. He has dug his own grave and in doing so has cut himself off from life. He can't get out, and he can't warn others. There obviously is a limit to how many chances a person can get.

The choice is there, but it is not offered endlessly.

Wake Up! Wake Up, the parable calls us. Wake up from the trance of your habitual ways of doing things, seeing things, or not seeing things.

Since the time of Moses, we have been given the Law. The Law is not a list of "should"; but a description of the behaviours that serve and support life as opposed to the ones that restrict, constrict and deny life.

Scripture tells us over and over how God speaks and moves through life and how we can cooperate with the Divine and what can happen when we don't. Individually, we might not experience the full effect of our choices but collectively we will.

We are the people of God and as a community we either thrive, or not. The actions of each person impact the whole; and as a whole, we either sink or swim.

The prophets warned the people; they didn't listen. They insisted on worshipping the golden calf, on creating their own dynasties. And over and over God sent wise people to guide the people out of their ignorance and self-deception, and over and over they fell back into self-serving ways that broke down community and brought about destruction.

In essence Jesus is saying, "How many warnings or chances do you people need?" He must be exasperated! C'mon, wake up, people!

Think about it. Even when God comes in person to show the way to live together- healing, forgiving and blessing, many still refuse to see the imprint of Love in their Universe; the direction Love is headed. Jesus foretells his own death and the manner in which it will be received when he says in the last line from today's reading - "Neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

If Jesus' life and death and resurrection don't wake us up, what else could possibly capture our attention? We live in denial. We think there's always a way out; always a second chance.

There's that popular saying, "No one on their death bed says, 'I wish I'd spent more time at the office.'" No, people inevitably talk about their love for family, friends, life itself and their regrets in the realm of relationships. Money never factors in.

Christians believe that there is a purpose to life and all the prophets from the beginning of time have reminded us that this purpose does not

have to do with accumulating power and wealth for oneself, or one's family.

Instead, as Christians, we have a beautiful vision. Paul put it forth as the wonderful, mysterious and powerful image of the Body of Christ. This model insists that each part of the body is necessary and precious. Created by God, each member is worthy of attention and care.

Each member, or part of the body, has a different function. But all parts are necessary and contribute to the health, well-being and responsiveness of the body. If one part is sick, or in need of support, then we tend to that part. In other words, we're only as strong and healthy as our weakest part. And so we care for each other. And in this caring, the body is transformed into one functioning whole with all its individual parts. We give up nothing; we gain everything when we truly live into community. And the stronger the body, the more it can sustain. Not only in terms of challenges, but also in terms of how much love the body can withstand or hold. As the body, we become the container into which God's love is embraced; and when the body is strong, it won't be overwhelmed - its circuits won't blow. With strong circuitry the body can become even stronger; and the currents of Love increase until the body is radiating and pulsating Love. This Love is what draws others to Christ.

Christianity is a religion of incarnation. God came in *bodily form* to live amongst us. God experienced first-hand the arc and depth of life in human form. Jesus experienced loneliness, pain, unbearable suffering. He also experienced love, joy, and friendship. In Jesus we see the infinite in finite form. His wasn't a 'comfortable' life - it was a life that changed the

course of Love. Our God is a God who has shown us that love is relational; that we *experience* Love with God and one another. Nothing else gets us there: not wealth or power. That gets us into Hell. Here on earth, or wherever.

And here's the rub. We have to make a choice. For love, for life. Do we want to be right? – or in relationship? Do we want to be safe? – or dangerously alive.

We can shut our eyes, or our doors, to life. Someone once said, "The opposite of love isn't fear; it's indifference." Jesus challenges us to wake up and choose. Are we going to transform from our self-interested egoic selves into a body or community that thrives on mutuality - giving and receiving? After all, we've been told that to those who have, more will be given. Are our individual actions strengthening or weakening the body?

Each of us has our own work to do to become more aware of how we impact the body. Are we controlling, insistent on getting our own way? Are we willing to listen to others? Are we self-protective? Do we ignore others?

There's nothing like a retreat to see one's "stuff" come to light! Whenever I go on retreat, I learn so much about myself. One of the skills I have developed over the years is some self-compassion. It's hard to see how self-centred I am. And it's hard to be willing to open the door and welcome in the suffering on our doorsteps. I need support, I need courage and most of all, I need grace, big time.

Jesus wants us to wake up. Not because we're bad or because it would be nice if we did, but because it is in the Divine pattern of the

Universe that life seeks life. And life for humans depends on sharing resources, caring for each other, and caring for the world we are part of.

Today more than ever, Jesus' message is so pertinent. Wake up!
What is our version of Lazarus and the rich man today?

That is a conversation it would behoove us to have. How can we care for this body of which each are an intrinsic part? What do we have to wake up to? What shift do we have to make to ease the flow of giving and receiving in our community?

And before we even begin that conversation, we are invited to a banquet of love, where the ultimate sacrifice of love is offered when our God reminds us, "This is my body....."

Amen.