**Amos 6:1-7**

6Alas for those who are at ease in Zion, and for those who feel secure on Mount Samaria . . . 4Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the stall; 5who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp, and like David improvise on instruments of music; 6who drink wine from bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph! 7Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile, and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away.

**Luke 16:19-31**

19“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. 20And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, 21who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. 22The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. 23In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. 24He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.’ 25But Abraham said, ‘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. 26Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’ 27He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house— 28for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ 29Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ 30He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ 31He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

“Lazarus at the Gate”

The Rev. Lisa Durkee

September 25, 2022

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, oh Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

I have often quoted the adage “a little bit of knowledge is a dangerous thing,” and probably have as often altered it a bit to say more specifically, *a little bit of reading is a dangerous thing*. They often go hand in hand. You may agree with me as I share with you a part of a reflection on this morning’s Hebrew Bible lesson by Rolf Jacobsen, who is Professor of Old Testament and Alvin N. Rogness Chair in Scripture, Theology, and Ministry at Luther Seminary in Minnesota. I had the privilege of hearing Jacobsen preach and discuss his sermon preparation while I was in Denver in May and have enjoyed reading him more frequently since. He writes, “Too often when Christian preachers take up the topic of justice, an implicit dualism is communicated in which the congregation hears the pastor saying, "Some of you do injustice, while some of us do justice. Be like me and do justice." Especially the men and women in the congregation who work in business too often hear the preacher as suggesting the secular realm automatically is a realm of injustice. We know that this is not true, but too often this is what the congregation hears from the pulpit. If that is the message a preacher were to preach this Sunday, it would be better just to skip the sermon altogether.”

So, a little bit of reading or knowledge would have me stop right here, but I won’t—sorry. I found myself considering Jacobsen’s words and our Gospel lesson in a different light given the season in which I am reading it this year. There is a tremendous polarization in our country at the moment, with dualities of every kind pulling us from pole to pole in our thinking and our ability to have respectful conversations about nearly anything. The polarization is sometimes named politicization, somehow indicating that morality is equated with a particular party position. We know that individual decisions and our understanding of circumstances *are* framed by our morality, and I don’t want you to hear what I reflect on today to ask you to do anything but reflect individually so that we may act communally. Jacobsen begins his reflection on today’s passage from Amos by putting it into a broader context of prophetic understanding of justice that helps us to read not only this lesson, but also the New Testament lesson from Luke. Jacobsen begins a bit farther back in Amos, reading from the 5th chapter: “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. He then looks to Isaiah, sharing from the 16th and 17th verses of the 1st chapter: “Cease to do evil, Learn to do good, Seek justice, Rescue the oppressed, Defend the orphan, plead for the widow.” These are fairly direct action statements, wouldn’t you say? In them I read no binary opposition at all.

Jacobsen then quotes Micah 6:8, the passage I often lean on when I wonder what we are to do and who we are to be in response to God’s love for us:

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you

but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Jacobsen goes on to offer what is an excellent exposition on justice itself, laying out six clear statements about what justice and injustice are and are not, indicating that justice is a social, a civil, a political and theological concept. Most striking to me and what I hope you may also find to be helpful is his stressing “almost all of us are already both doing justice and doing injustice, merely by the fact that we are participating in multiple social systems.”

Pablo Plaza spent three months walking from Venezuela before ending up in San Antonio, where he hoped to find asylum and a path to working in order to support his family. Instead, he was one of the nearly 50 people who were tricked into thinking they were being flown from Texas to Boston, where they would be helped to find work and lodging. He understandably feels used, as though he were somehow a token in a game being played. The sanctuary he desired was not meant to be the Edgartown Episcopal Church, but its members offered compassionate care when they learned of the circumstances of these desperate people who hoped to make their lives and the lives of their families safer and more abundant. I have heard many responses to these events, including outrage at those who orchestrated the plan as well as frustration that the backlog at our borders is as significant as it is. For some, this frustration moves from the general to a more targeted criticism of those who would venture to become citizens of the United States in this way. There is anger at what is named, variously, abuse of our generosity, freeloading, begging, mooching. You get the picture. Little is noted about the difficulties these individuals face in Venezuela or in other nations from which people are fleeing. Too little is made clear about the way these people are being assisted or not when they *do* arrive in our country. What do we do to care for them? Rolf Jacobsen suggests that our responses to this and any event come from positions within the several systems he points to. We may be, simultaneously, parents, employees or employers—of public or private institutions; we may be attorneys for prosecution or for defense; teachers of economic policy or social welfare. We may be persons with deep connection to a faith institution and also a member of the Chamber of Commerce. This kind of multi-layered positioning makes for an interesting and often difficult task when we read scripture to understand its implications for us today, which brings us back to today’s text, in which we hear about someone whose wealth is apparent in his appearance and in his habits, and also hear about someone who has clearly fallen outside of any of the norms of healthy social interaction or care. So, what is he owed and what might the man in purple robes be expected to provide? Justice may be expressed within various systems, but its central property of conducting all practices for the benefit of the greater good is unequivocal. It is helpful to keep this overarching sense of justice in mind when reading this morning’s lesson from Luke or in reading the morning paper. What will we do, for example, when we learn how profoundly the lives of individuals and families in Puerto Rico and over the border in Canada are affected by Hurricane Fiona? How will we create sanctuaries that, indeed, offer safe space for those who need comfort and care? How might we support those who are assisting most directly?

Jesus looks to the prophets throughout his own teaching, citing our need to care for the poor and the needy as a fulfillment of the law of God. We are asked to make God’s laws our own, and of paramount importance when we find ourselves walking within multiple systems at once. Our God is a God of justice, as we read directly in the 30th chapter of Isaiah. Whenever we wonder whether our actions or even our thoughts are *just*, we can measure them against the words of the prophets and Jesus’ own words, “doing justice, loving kindness, and walking *humbly* with our God by ceasing to do evil, learning to do good, *seeking* justice, rescuing the oppressed, defending the orphan, and pleading for the widow.” To do so may well press us as we live within so many different systems, but as Christians we *are* asked to serve God first, even when to do so brings us under judgment from others. May we be strengthened to serve God in all that we do, living as Christ’s followers.