

Reversal of Fortune

Amos 6:1, 4-7 Luke 16:19-31

Preached by Richard Bolin at Culver-Palms United Methodist Church

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It is Kingdomtime and we have been talking about the kingdom of God, a central theme of the New Testament and the focus of the teaching of Jesus, who said, “Repent and believe the good news, for the kingdom of God is at hand.”

These are the things we have said about the kingdom of God so far:

The kingdom of God has broken into our midst through the ministry of Jesus, rearranging a broken world.

The kingdom of God is round, like King Arthur’s table. There are no hierarchies at the kingdom feast. It is not a seat-of-honor reserved kind of place. It is rather a welcome-table kind of place.

Kingdom living means traveling on a difficult road – an open-and-vulnerable-heart road. It is difficult to open our hearts to the cares of the world, but once we are on that path, there is no other way we would choose.

Kingdom building means seeking the lost. The kingdom of God has open doors ... open doors not only so that the lost can come in, but open doors through which God goes out to gather wayward souls and bring them to the party.

Kingdom seekers are shrewd. Kingdom seekers act with urgency and singleness of purpose.

Today Jesus tells us that the kingdom of God is upside down, or rather, the kingdom of God is right-side up and the rest of the world is upside down.

Jesus makes this point several times in his teachings. When his disciples try to keep children away from him because, after all, he has more important things to do and more important people to see, Jesus tells them, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.”(Mark 10:14)

In Jesus’ world and in ours being rich is a ticket that will get you into just about anyplace you want to go. But Jesus said, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” (Matthew 10:25)

And if these sayings only seem to hint at the kingdom’s grand reversal, Jesus states it explicitly more than once:

“Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.” (Matthew 19:30 and 20:16)

This morning we have heard Jesus tell a story to illustrate the point.

There was a rich man who lived in a fine house and feasted sumptuously. Lazarus was a poor man; a wretched, pitiful sight who sat outside the rich man's house, hoping for a few crumbs that might drop from the man's table. Jesus doesn't tell us any more about these two: how they came to be this way; how they had lived their lives. He tells us only that after they died they found their roles reversed: Lazarus in comfort and the rich man in torment.

Jesus does not tell this story in order to describe heaven and hell for us. Jesus tells this story in order to describe for us God's intention for the world of the living. The point

of the story is what the relationship between the rich man and Lazarus should have been when they were alive.

The rich man probably told himself that he had no responsibility for this poor beggar sitting at his gate. Lazarus was there because of his own sins. He was ultimately responsible for his own poverty. Wasn't he? No, that is not the way of God's world. The rich man found out he was wrong. But hadn't he really known all along? The truth was not a secret. It had been taught plainly from the time of Moses and the Prophets.

What do Moses and the Prophets have to say about poverty? They testify that as widespread as it is, as ancient as poverty is, as real as poverty is from generation to generation - it is not to be ignored. It is not just. It is not part of God's will for creation.

Note that the rich man's sin is not that he is rich, but that he is indifferent to the needs of the poor.

Charles Dickens told a story that has just about the same plot as this parable of Jesus. Dickens' story was called "A Christmas Carol" and the main character was Ebenezer Scrooge.

But Dickens' story has a different twist. Jacob Marley does come back from the dead to warn his friend Ebenezer to mend his ways, and though it seems a nearly impossible task, finally, with the help of the ghosts of Christmas past, present and future, Ebenezer's heart is changed.

Perhaps that is not such a different ending, after all. Because the story Jesus told is, after all, just a story. Jesus is not telling us that he knows a particular rich man and a true life Lazarus to whom this has happened, but he is telling a parable that is intended teach his audience. The point is that those who are listening, we who are listening, all have the opportunity to heed the lesson and change our ways.

Ron Sider, a Mennonite seminary professor whose books include *Rich Christians in a Hungry World* and *Living Like Jesus*, has written:

"Three things just do not fit together. Hundreds of biblical texts teach that God and his people care about the poor. Almost one quarter of the world's people try to survive on a mere one dollar a day. Yet American Christians who are 150 times richer give less and less each year as their wealth continues to grow."

"The gulf between Jesus' words and our actions turns secular neighbors away from our Christ. ... I collected all the biblical texts on poverty, justice, and the poor in a book, *For They Shall be Fed*, and it is two hundred pages long!"

"According to the United Nations, it would only cost \$30-\$40 billion a year to provide all people in developing countries with basic education, health care, and clean water - the same amount [people] spend on golf every year."

"The average five-year-old watches three and one-half hours of television a day. The average adult, five hours - that means watching 21,000 commercials a year. And the message is the same: 'Buy something - do it now. Happiness comes through more and more material possessions'"

After recounting these troubling signs of our present reality, Dr. Sider makes a modest proposal.

"As I have thought and prayed about a successful resistance movement to consumerism, I have begun to dream of a Generous Christians Campaign that could sweep through the Western church. Missions agencies, prayer networks, and Christian social ministries could join together to plead with affluent Christians to break the bonds

of today's suffocating materialism.... At the center could be a simple pledge. This Generous Christians Pledge is not complicated. Every Christian could make it - and keep it."

The Generous Christians Pledge

I pledge to open my heart to God's call to care as much about the poor as the Bible does.

I therefore commit:

- ◆ *Daily*, to pray for the poor, beginning with the Generous Christians Prayer: "Lord Jesus, teach my heart to share your love for the poor."
- ◆ *Weekly*, to minister, at least one hour to a poor person: helping, serving, sharing with, and, mostly, getting to know someone in need.
- ◆ *Monthly*, to study, at least one story, book, article or film about the plight of the poor and hungry and discuss it with others.
- ◆ *Yearly*, to retreat, for a few hours before the Scriptures to meditate on this one question: "Is caring for the poor as important in my life as it is in the Bible?" and to examine my budget and priorities in light of it, asking prayerfully what changes God would like me to make in the use of my time, money, and influence.

(Circuit Rider Magazine, July/August, 1998)

Our world is not what it should be, and when God gets hold of us, God sends us forth to do something about it. The story Jesus tells us this morning has to do with the gap between rich and poor, but that is not the only area God wants us to make a difference.

When the followers of Jesus walk right-side-around in an upside down world, then there neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. Privilege and power based upon race, sex or status must come to an end. Swords shall be beaten into plowshares, and nations will not learn war any more.

The ways of the kingdom of God are not like the ways of the world, but the kingdom of God is all about the way we live in this world. Let us follow Jesus on the way, and turn the world around. Amen.