

TWO HOUSTONS

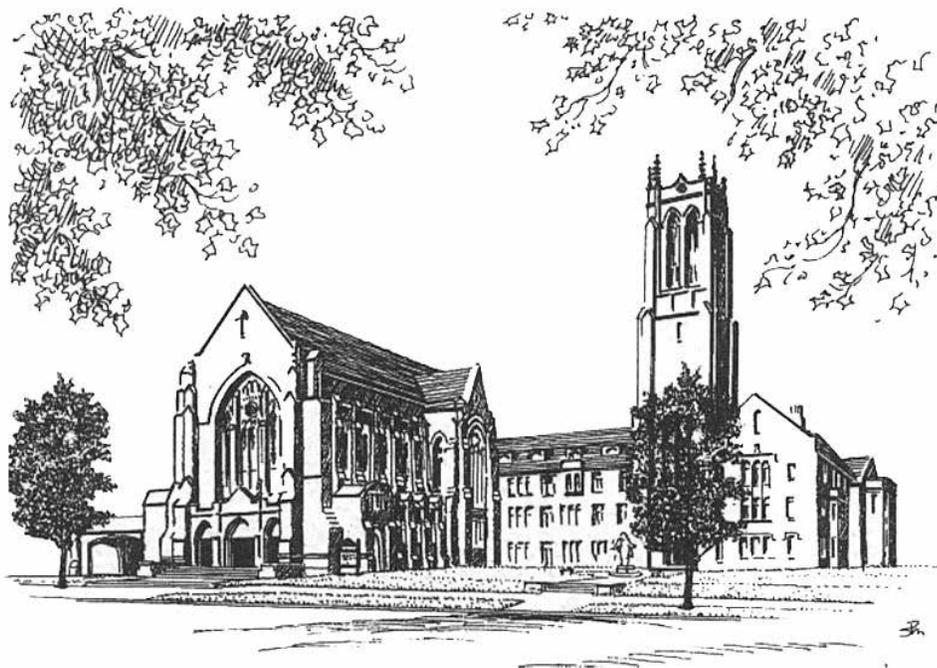
by

Rev. Karyn Richards-Kuan

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Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

9:45 a.m.



ST. PAUL'S

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

5501 Main Street

Houston, Texas 77004-6917

713-528-0527

www.stpaulshouston.org

Texts: Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15 • Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16 • 1 Timothy 6:6-19 • Luke 6:19-31

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15

The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord in the tenth year of King Zedekiah of Judah, which was the eighteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar. At that time the army of the king of Babylon was besieging Jerusalem, and the prophet Jeremiah was confined in the court of the guard that was in the palace of the king of Judah, where King Zedekiah of Judah had confined him.

Zedekiah had said, “Why do you prophesy and say: Thus says the Lord: I am going to give this city into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall take it; Jeremiah said, The word of the Lord came to me: Hanamel son of your uncle Shallum is going to come to you and say, “Buy my field that is at Anathoth, for the right of redemption by purchase is yours.”

Then my cousin Hanamel came to me in the court of the guard, in accordance with the word of the Lord, and said to me, “Buy my field that is at Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, for the right of possession and redemption is yours; buy it for yourself.”

Then I knew that this was the word of the Lord. And I bought the field at Anathoth from my cousin Hanamel, and weighed out the money to him, seventeen shekels of silver. I signed the deed, sealed it, got witnesses, and weighed the money on scales. Then I took the sealed deed of purchase, containing the terms and conditions, and the open copy; and I gave the deed of purchase to Baruch son of Neriah son of Mahseiah, in the presence of my cousin Hanamel, in the presence of the witnesses who signed the deed of purchase, and in the presence of all the Judeans who were sitting in the court of the guard. In their presence I charged Baruch, saying, Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Take these deeds, both this sealed deed of purchase and this open deed, and put them in an earthenware jar, in order that they may last for a long time. For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.

Psalm 91

You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,

will say to the Lord, “My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust.”

For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence;

he will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.

You will not fear the terror of the night, or the arrow that flies by day, or the pestilence that stalks in darkness, or the destruction that wastes at noonday.

Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name.

When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honor them.

With long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation.

1 Timothy 6:6-19

Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains. But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

In the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you to keep the commandment without spot or blame until the manifestation of our Lord

Jesus Christ, which he will bring about at the right time — he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords. It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see; to him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen. As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

Luke 16:19-31

“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores.

“The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side.

“He 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.’

“But 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. Besides 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.’

“He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house — for I have five brothers — that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’

“Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’

“He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’

“He 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.’”

The scriptures in our lectionary this morning paint a compelling picture of land, money, and privilege. It’s like all of these separate texts (that were recorded and translated by different people at very different times and circumstances) are working collaboratively to egg us on in our time today.

Now, I can only talk from my own perspective, and that is a perspective of privilege. Because of the multivalent nature of privilege, we are all more privileged than others, and we are all less privileged than others. The parable in today’s Gospel illustrates privilege through two absolutes, but we know that the world outside of parables is more nuanced than that.

The texts are speaking to us in chorus as if in four-part harmony, and they are asking us to think:

What is the thing that we orient our lives around?

What system, what set of relationships, wins out for our motivation?

How can we interact with our resources in a way that serves God and not wealth?

How can we change our relationship with abundance so that we don’t become the rich man who was blinded?

The prophet, epistle, and gospel all talk about money, but Jeremiah is the only one where an actual transaction takes place. In the passage, Jeremiah buys some land. What made Jeremiah’s actions significant and even prophetic were the location and the situation. You see the field that was purchased was located in the city of Jerusalem. Jeremiah made the transaction in what we might call a depressed real-estate market, due to the fact that the city was actively being sieged and was due to

be conquered by the Babylonian army in no time at all. This isn't what we might consider to be a wise investment decision. We don't usually purchase fields to grow our food and make our living in the midst of a war zone. That doesn't boast of a very healthy profit margin.

This transaction happened in not a private setting behind closed doors, but in a public and collaborative way. The communal witness of this action is significant because of the communal impact that this purchase has. When others would be likely to say "why bother with investing all of that money in this land when we will just be conquered and you will lose it," Jeremiah demonstrates that there is hope that this land will prosper again, telling the community that the land should not be considered lost and forsaken, for in this passage the two key verbs are "buy" and "redeem." God tells the prophet Jeremiah to use his purchasing power in a way that is synonymous with redemption — not for Jeremiah himself, but for the community.

The Gospel passage from last week brought to us the question of what kind of system we serve based on not just any community, but the economic community. Is it a destructive one based on scarcity or a constructive one of life-giving abundance? This first letter to Timothy tells us to set our hopes, to set our eyes not on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God. We can set our eyes on God so that we can take hold of the life that really is life by looking at our neighbor, and seeing in them the light of Christ, the divine spark that is within each one of us. This is what the rich man did not ever see in Lazarus — **because the rich man never saw Lazarus.**

In reading about these two men, we thought we were in a Gospel, but we have been dropped right in the middle of an apocalypse. An apocalypse is often an exaggerated, extreme narrative that is meant to lift the curtain, so to speak. It is meant to be a caution, a warning, something to help us, though rather jarring. The text presents us with a great moral challenge of seeing, and then making visible, the invisible suffering of the world.

In the story the rich man and Lazarus never actually interact with one another. This is not another version of the Good Samaritan archetype — there is no passing by on the other side of the road, there is no help denied or scorn shown. You'll notice that in the parable the rich man isn't depicted as evil or hateful; he is technically a neutral character. His privilege blinded him to the needs of Lazarus. He didn't hear the voice of hurt that was coming from the far edges of his property.

The rich man and Lazarus are separated by the physical boundary of the gate of the house and the even more impenetrable boundary of wealth. The text says that the rich man was clothed in purple and fine linen, and in those times there were actually laws about wearing purple clothing because this indicated royalty. Lazarus was not on the radar of the man who had been born into the royal echelon. If you were to walk through the rich man's neighborhood, say you were invited over for a banquet, you would see two different worlds. The world inside the rich man's home, which is abundant in food and resources, and you would see the world outside the gate, where Lazarus sat with his sores, in deep distress, and in need of many things. In his ignorance the rich man did not see Lazarus, did not hear his pain, and thus in his privilege made Lazarus invisible in this world.

Mayor Turner was here at St. Paul's a couple weeks ago for a breakfast with faith leaders from around the city. He talked about the two Houstons you see when you drive across our city. These two versions of Houston are separated by physical boundaries, wealth, and race. They are defined by the quality of their schools, their access to public transportation and parks, their proximity to business centers. These two Houstons, one looks kinda run down and the other is a little bit nicer, maybe even a lot nicer. There's not a lot of mixing in between, except for in the economic exchange of services. When you have this kind of dynamic you can mostly coexist, mostly, but you run the risk of letting some important things slip by. When there are two kinds of cities in one you run the risk of developing resentment, maybe some fear.

Now I'm not going to subject any population in this city to a comparison with Lazarus — such a degrading and undignified image, sitting begging for

crumbs outside the gate with the only companions he has: the dogs who lick his wounds. But who do we degrade, whose dignity do we not recognize when we ignore people on the other side of the gate, folks who might not have been born into a narrative with as many fulfilled needs as we have.

What's our gate?

What is our great chasm that we risk making permanent if we do not come across it now?

Is it how we're clothed? Is it linens, or sores, or melanin?

Is it 45? Can we not see the relationships that must be built because the freeway is blocking us?

In the text the rich man is just as far away from truly seeing and understanding the humanity of Lazarus in death as he was in life. He only ever addresses Abraham and pleads with him to send Lazarus on not one but two servant errands. The rich man wants to save his brothers from the same agony he is in, the Greek word here being close to an anxiety or sorrow, like the pain of remorse. It would seem that he is repentant of his ignorance in life, but still doesn't understand Lazarus — no verbal recognition of Lazarus's pain in life, no apology is made, not even the dignity talking to him. And yet the rich man still wants Lazarus to go to his brothers as a sign, and the response he gets is no, no, your brothers have Moses and all the other prophets that they've already ignored. You think they'll believe that you're sending a message from the dead through Lazarus?

How many signs do we need?

How many prophets must speak?

How many articles must we read, how many terrifyingly tragic videos on the internet do we need to witness?

How many names: Terence Crutcher. Philando Castile. Alton Sterling. Eric Garner. Trayvon Martin. Sandra Bland. Akai Gurley. Freddie Gray. This is a long and incomplete list.

The case-by-case details are different and the situation is so difficult on both sides, but there is a pattern. When there is a pattern that we can see, a clear statistic,

and we ignore that, and we try to explain it away, we are ignoring Lazarus with the blindness of our privilege.

Desmond Tutu reminds us that when you are neutral in these situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. We must listen to the voices of hurt and, instead of dismissing them or offering keyboard condolences, *listen* so that we can see one another. We can try to understand one another. And we can begin to dismantle the gate so that when one of us experiences injustice or pain, we are already in relationship with one another and we can see beyond the gate of privilege and prejudice and we can validate that pain and make it visible so that that injustice and that hurt does not happen again next week.

There is hope in the parable that we read today. There is hope because Jesus would not have bothered to tell this parable of impenetrable chasms if there wasn't something we could do about it.

So what can we do?

First, we need to claim our bias. We need to understand that no matter how much we study and learn and pray, we all have an implicit racial bias and this completely alters how each of us sees the world. None of us is color blind. People tell me "they don't see me as Asian," and this greatly saddens me because I *am* Asian. You're telling me that you don't see my humanity; you don't see who I am, my heritage, where I come from. I know that this comes out of a very good place and a desire to in fact see my humanity. However this is not the correct way to own the way that we have come to live in to race in this world.

I live in and perpetuate a system that indulges in racism, and much of the time I ignore this reality because of my implicit racial bias. The *only way* to improve this bias is to be in relationship with one another.

This means spending time with folks who the economic system has separated us from. For example if you're white it means being intentional about making relationships with folks who are black or Latino or another shade of brown, and it means doing this in their own space. Inviting folks over in your own community is great, but let's be real, brown folks are forced to assimilate and function in white

spaces all the time, so it's really important to understand what it is to be the visitor in a space and to share the power that is connected with that. It is important that we are not always the ones saying "oh come be with us in this space that is convenient to us that we have created and formed to our own comfort zone."

If there aren't those communal spaces or hospitality spaces in those communities where we can learn about one another and we can learn how to see one another in order to make each other visible, then maybe we need to look at how we can be a part of working with that community to create and cultivate such a space. Perhaps an opportunity to use our purchasing power as a tool of redemption for the community as Jeremiah did.

Now confession time: racial reconciliation is overwhelming to me. As of right this moment, I am not doing anything to form intentional relationship with people who are different than me and who live in a different kind of neighborhood than I do. I am overwhelmed by the reconciliation that must happen within our city, our country, around the globe. I am also overwhelmed by the needs of my own life, with full time ministry, full time grad school, tending to a new marriage, and tending to some old parents. I can't imagine adding something like this to my weekly or even monthly schedule. Perhaps you find yourself in the same place that I find myself. Your plate is full, and the needs of the world, even the needs of our city, they're just too overwhelming. Maybe when the kids or grown, or maybe when my parents have passed, or maybe when work isn't so busy. And with the kind of turmoil that our world is in, what difference will a single relationship make anyway?

The Talmud reminds us to not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. It echoes Micah, saying to do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.

A community is a web of single relationships. We need to become a community that takes hold of the life that really is life. Ched Myers reminds us that we will all become victims of the social barriers that we erect if we don't deconstruct them when we have the chance. The tragedy of this week and of many, many weeks is

pushing me to start building relationships so that one by one, our culture can shift. I am not saying this because I have perceived a single person in our congregation to be racially prejudiced or hateful. I don't know your hearts; I only know mine. And despite what I want to be true, my heart does carry this prejudice. If you feel that your heart also carries a prejudice against others, and you want to work to see the divine spark and the light of Christ in every face, I invite you to continue to walk this journey with me.

May we do justly, now; love mercy, now; walk humbly now. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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