

Proper 21 C

One of the problems we have is knowing exactly what we are supposed to do and not doing it. I bet you are familiar with this problem.

I know that sit-ups and running are good for me and yet prefer beer and a handful of peanuts. We know daily prayer and scripture reading increase us in holiness and yet we fail in those disciplines.

We know how much we should save for retirement and yet find other things to spend our money on. We know that our country, with its dramatic inequalities and limited social safety net, depends on our generosity and yet we do not give as is needed.

We have a lot of good information about what we should do and who we should be.

To our credit, we do a lot of things that we know to be good and holy.

But none of us achieve the full measure of our knowledge of the good and some (certainly not any in our church!) make only a passing effort.

We know and yet we do not do.

Think about how long the ethical exhortations of the Scriptures have been with us.

We have lived with the Ten Commandments (in written form) for 3000 years or so, in oral tradition for much longer than that.

And still we live with sassy children, theft, jealousy, murder, and grass cutting on the Sabbath.

The wider law's teaching to treasure widows, foreigners, and orphans is of similar age and often seems forgotten in a world of narrowing mercy.

The words of Jesus in the sermon on the mount have had 2000 years to sink in, are claimed by the church, needlepointed in our dens, calligraphy-ed in our offices, and still we judge and worry and fail to make a world in which the blessedness of the meek, the peacemakers, and the pure in heart is evident.

Even as Jesus preached, the problem was evident, the problem of having sound guidance from God and being unable/willing to implement it.

Today's parable is a real attention-getter, overdrawn to make a point in dramatic terms.

The rich man did not discretely enjoy his wealth; he wore the fanciest clothes and ate sumptuously every day. Gout was in his future.

And the poor man wasn't just out of money here and there, when hit with a high gas bill in February, for instance.

He lay on the threshold, licked by dogs, hungry and festering.

The door was shut between them, and the rich man took no interest in the suffering man at his gate. Then they died, and suddenly the rich man was interested in Lazarus.

Send him here, with some water, send him to my brothers to warn them that they should be merciful to the poor while they live.

No, Abraham, the master of the afterlife, says, they have the commandments and words of the prophets.

They have the word of God in the Scriptures; that should be enough to get their attention.

Those ancient words should be enough, enough to convict and convert, to make a holy people who seek God and a world that reflects God's loving will.

And still we cannot help but feel that the ancient teachings have not been enough, as we continue live in days when our society seems as frayed and on edge as ever, at least in my lifetime.

The poor do not live at our doors these days, festering and starving.

We have made some progress.

And yet there are many in our nation who do not think they have a chance for a better life and the world groans with refugees at the gates who indeed do not know where they will find the next meal or what patch of ground they will call home.

Who has time to face this world of suffering?

If we are not feasting sumptuously in silk, we are indeed working, and doing homework, and cleaning up the kitchen and are left with little enough time to know how to help.

The Bible tells us how the world should be; we do not have the time, energy, will to make it so. Even this dramatic parable, with its threat of eternal torment for those who ignore the poor, has not made a great change in its 1900 years of written existence.

And yet we come together for hope.

The Holy Spirit at work among us for the 1900 years of this parable's life has made some change among us.

Perhaps in Palm Beach or on the Upper East side a scene like this parable can be imagined, with the suffering excluded by the gates of those who feast within in pagan splendor.

In Greenwood, among Christians, I see better things and for us I have a greater hope.

To be sure, too many hurting people are ignored in our world.

And yet it would be wrong not to confess that God has done something among us since the advent of Christ.

If we do not know how to do what we are meant to do, if there is still a long way to go, we give thanks that God knows how to accomplish God's purposes.

Sometimes slowly and unevenly, and we are a people called to look for those signs and hold them up. I know you to be a people generous in giving, to and through this church.

Almost every year, we have embraced some new facet of ministry and of our community's needs through your giving.

And for an even greater day we hope, when our humble efforts of cooperation with the Spirit will be overshadowed by the fullness of the Kingdom of God, in which none of us will hunger or thirst and all will be seated at a table, where Christ, the great host, leads all in the feast of eternal joy.

The feast is beginning among us;

let us open the gates we can;

cast off the luxuries we do not need;

feed the hungry we can;

and prepare for the one who can do all that we cannot.