

“What Is Truly Rich to God?”

Twenty Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time, September 25, 2016

Amos 6:1a, 4-7 Psalm 146 Luke 16:19-31

First Presbyterian Church of Sandpoint, Idaho

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When I was a kid my family went on a vacation. Our station wagon towed the tent trailer and we camped out in Glacier-Waterton International Peace Park. On the Canadian side at Waterton we stayed in the city campground, but went to visit the Prince of Wales Hotel, my brother calls it, “Prince Charlie’s Place.” The wild wind on that north end of Waterton Lake was amazing, so strong you could lean into it and it would hold you up. It had a chilly bite to it as it came down from the peaks and across the open water’s whitecaps over the international boundary. It was nice to go inside of that hotel, into the lovely lobby, warm and protected, with views of the lake from a more civilized approach. My parents thought it would be nice to take us all to High Tea, and it was just about time to go in the dining room for this special occasion. But, we were told at the door that we could not go in. High Tea is formal, and people wearing jeans were not allowed. We all had jeans on, and even though they were fairly clean, my parents just could not convince them to let us in. To this day, I have not had high tea at Prince Charlie’s Place, even though I returned a few years later on a bike tour. I still didn’t have the right clothing.

Well, today is Greg’s last Sunday as our church pianist and choir director. All of you are invited, whether you’re dressed in a suit and tie, or wearing jeans, or even casual clothing, to come down and share a time of refreshment and conversation in the Fellowship Hall. There is tea, or coffee, or juice, and a cake and some other things to eat. It may not be high society, but it is a time to celebrate the relational ministry Greg has had with us for these many years. His presence, his family’s connection, have helped give shape to our life together. You will not be blocked at the door when you come to share in the love and appreciation of just being together, as community.

But today is also an ending. Next Sunday, and the Sundays after that, Greg won’t be here. What was, will be no longer, and we can’t go back no matter how hard we may try or wish it was different. Whenever there is a permanent type of ending, grief enters in, hopefully, because grief is what helps us through endings in order to receive something new coming. Sometimes we’re not ready to receive something new if we haven’t said goodbye properly or haven’t come to terms with what it is that is ending. Grief work is very difficult, and we often times go out of our way to avoid it. No one enjoys suffering, and grieving a loss is hard, sometimes beyond the word, “console.” Even healed wounds have scars.

Today’s scriptures share elaborate descriptions of wealthy people enjoying the finer things in life. Amos gives descriptions of “those who are at ease... those who feel secure... who lie on beds [decorated with] ivory, lounging on couches,” eating meat, singing and drinking, and enjoying good hygiene and clean bodies. This image could be used for middle and upper class Americans, because most of us have nice beds, food,

some leisure time, and the ability and resources to stay healthy. So his description, along with Luke's picture of the rich man dressed in purple (a sign of wealth, even royalty), and fine linen, feasting every day; these actually sound normal to us. We have several changes of clothing, and usually have food to eat. It doesn't say the ancient Israelites have two cars in the driveway, but cars were not invented yet!

But there is a problem, actually multiple problems. One is a problem of the heart, and others have to do with inequality. It seems that having all this wealth, wearing the right clothes to get into places of high society, leads to nothing, and even worse, actually contributes to the suffering of ourselves and others, in this life and its continuation. The problem of the heart is shown in Amos when he describes those living at ease with all this wealth, "but [they] are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!" Nations are in turmoil, and Israel will soon fall, but those who focus on luxuries are not grieving, even though people are dying and many more will die. They don't seem to care, as long as they got it good right now. But is it just them, back then?

Every 20 seconds a child dies in the world of a water related illness, like diarrhea (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iRGZOCaD9sQ>, Water Day Film Festival official entry).

A good deal of this global suffering is a result of our lifestyle, American foreign policies, our environmental impacts, and our fears which create divisions, our thoughts, which carve great chasms that seem fixed. Some people may call this a state of sin, life that seems broken. If we worship for about an hour and fifteen minutes on average, that means 75 minutes, which, with three kids per minute; while we enjoy this time of worship together, 25 children die in the world from lack of access to clean water. What luxury we live with and take for granted, often blissfully without weeping.

One preacher recently proclaimed, that "the Lord teaches that perfection consists in love, and...that Luke explicitly explains that perfection is the merciful love: 'to be perfect means to be merciful.' This is something both these scriptures share, that those living with ease lack mercy, and they lack love, and it's no surprise then that they ultimately discover their imperfection, their missing God's mark. Their ease is at someone else's expense, and yet God will not stand for this imbalance to remain. Then again, who or what do we mean by the name, God? What is true wealth to God?

As Richard Rohr mentions in a description of his most recent book, he says, "God is not what most people think... Visions of an angry, distant moral scorekeeper or a supernatural Santa Claus handing out cosmic lottery tickets to those who attend the right church or say the right prayer... [these visions] dominate our culture. For many others, God has become irrelevant or simply unbelievable." We could add to this some local observations. We tend to say and believe that God is love, and if we're honest we know that Jesus was a pacifist. He told the disciples to put away their swords. Yet I just saw a couple days ago on a new Ford Pick-up a sticker that said, "God Bless our Troop, Especially Our Snipers." A perception of God from warrior religion would lead to such an image and misunderstanding of God's blessings.

Thankfully, Rohr's thoughts are encouraging as he says, "It is my belief that changing our perception of God has the potential to change everything. The greatest dis-

ease facing humanity right now is our profound and painful sense of disconnection— disconnection from God, certainly, but also from ourselves (our bodies and True Selves), from each other, and from creation. We see this in political corruption, ecological devastation, war and violence, fearing and even hating each other because of our differences, whether race, religion, or sexual orientation. Our world needs to be reminded of our interdependence and our inherent union with what is.... I believe the Trinity can teach us how to live in creative collaboration, valuing and honoring our differences while also serving each other with humility and compassion.” (from an email promoting his new book, <http://thedivinedance.org/pre-order-here/>).

Psalm 146 gives us a clue on how to live a blessed life, one that finds what is truly valuable. Happy, or blessed, or complete, or whole, are those “whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever; who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry.” A long list of all the amazing things God does, and the promise that love wins and wickedness comes to ruin. “Praise the LORD” is how this Psalm starts and ends.

Maybe we can mimic that in our week ahead. As we wake up in the morning, sitting up on the side of our bed, assuming most of us have a bed, sitting up the first thing we say out loud is, “Praise the LORD.” And the last thing we say as we get back into bed to finish the day, “Praise the LORD.” And notice this is capital L-O-R-D, which is the Hebrew Holy of Holies, God Almighty, Yahweh. This is the fullness of God, who Presence calls in mercy for us to be merciful, who Presence gives the gift of life, so we may humbly receive that which we need for life. Whose Presence helps us receive in order to give, in order to be. We receive God’s gift of Presence. God’s self, the image of God, is within us. We are called to honor God’s Presence in all things. If God made all things, then all things have God’s energy, the energy of love; and if all things have this energy, then all things are connected, in relationship, are held in common. Any separation or distinction is on our part, not God’s, our false-self having its way with us.

Hopefully living in praise each day is more than lip service from the side of the bed, but an orientation for life, a trajectory that increases mercy. Like Pope Francis says, there are two verbs of mercy. We live to forgive and we live to give.

[\(https://zenit.org/articles/pope-francis-gives-2-verbs-of-mercy-at-general-audience/\)](https://zenit.org/articles/pope-francis-gives-2-verbs-of-mercy-at-general-audience/). Forgive and give, these provide shape to Godly love, keeping us grounded through humility, sharing compassion which frees us from judging; all of these are God’s true riches leading to life in its fullness.

So as we go into the week ahead, into the day ahead, let’s remember that our life is connected to a larger whole, part of a seamless garment of grace grounded in God. Let’s invite God to help this reality take shape through mercy in our lives, in our society, and in our world, as we forgive and give through humility and compassion, the mercy of the LORD which is forever and ever, Amen.