

OPEN YOUR EYES

The Reverend Anne F. C. Richards
September 26, 2010, Luke 16:19-31

Over the summer I read an article that talked about the tremendous popularity of Buddhism among Westerners. As contrasted with the seeming lack of popularity of Christianity. Why do people think Buddhism is so great, while Christianity seems so ho-hum? Well, what the author of this article said is that people are attracted to Buddhism because it is presented as **a way of life**, a clear spiritual practice, a path, that can help you live a good and compassionate life. Whereas traditionally Christianity has been thought of as **a set of doctrines** - hard, cold, and nonnegotiable, that you're asked to sign onto – doctrines that are not always really explained or made relevant to ordinary life.

Well, Christianity **is** a way of life, and today's gospel tells us what that way of life is like. Josh preached to us last week about money, and as Father Peter read the gospel about the rich man and the poor man a few minutes ago you probably thought to yourself, "Oh boy, here comes another sermon about money!" Please know: We don't choose these readings. The readings each week come down to us from the compilers of what's called the Sunday lectionary. There's a version of it in the back of the Book of Common Prayer. The compilers try to give us a fair representation of the breadth of Scripture throughout the year. And the reason it seems like we hear a lot about money in the readings is because Jesus talked about money more, much more, than he talked about anything else, including sex. Why did he have to do that?

Let's look at the story. A rich man, whose name we are not given, lives the high life. He's kind of the Bernie Madoff of the ancient world. He cares for himself sumptuously. A poor man, Lazarus, lives the low life. Dogs lick his sores – you can't go

lower than that. He lies (notice he is too weak to stand) by the rich man's gate. The rich man doesn't rebuff him. He doesn't use the excuse that people in the city use when they decide not to give money to a street person. He doesn't say, "No, I won't give you any money because I know you'll use it on booze or drugs." He doesn't say anything to him because he never even sees him. He's completely blind to him. All he can see is himself.

One day, Lazarus dies. The story says nothing about him being buried – he's too poor for that. His body is just left by the side of the road. When the rich man dies, he is buried. The poor man goes to the bosom of Abraham; the rich man goes to Hades, the place of torment and disconnection. And we know why. Notice that he isn't "sent" to Hades by God...he is already there by virtue of the way he has lived. In a sense, he was in Hades even before he died; he just didn't know it. He couldn't see it. But now, his eyes are opened.

The gospel says that the rich man "sees" Lazarus in comfort with Abraham. Of course that is in part an ironic comment. Because the rich man doesn't really "see" Lazarus at all – at least, not as a real human being. He acts as if he's big pals with Abraham, but he talks about Lazarus as if he's his errand boy or his servant: "Father Abraham, send Lazarus to me with some water. No? OK, then send him to tell my brothers to repent."

I love how gentle Abraham is with this obnoxious guy. He says to him, "Child, remember you've had your share. It's too late for anything to be different for you. And trust me, your brothers already know what to do. The law and the prophets are crystal clear that the rich should share their wealth with the poor."

You know that tag line people say a lot: “It’s not about the money.” Well, that applies here. Money is not about money. Money is about people. Money is about relationships. The rich man’s real problem wasn’t that he was greedy – it was that he was blind. He didn’t see other people as full human beings with needs as compelling as his own. As I was thinking about this story this week, Jeffrey Dahmer came to mind. Remember him, the serial killer who murdered seventeen people? After he was arrested he was asked how in the world he could have brutally murdered so many people, and he answered, “People? There are just so many of them. What’s the big deal about seventeen?”

The Bible makes it clear that this attitude has deep roots in the human story. Can anyone tell me when the word “sin” appears for the first time in the Bible? Interestingly, it’s not in the story of Adam and Eve. It’s in the strange little story of their sons, Cain and Abel. Cain was a farmer. Abel was a shepherd. Cain offers to God some of his produce, ordinary stuff, nothing special; but Abel gives God his very best lambs. And God is very pleased with Abel’s generosity. This makes Cain angry. And God says something very interesting to him: “Why are you angry?...If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.” I think God is saying something like “Look, your brother excelled because he gave me his best. You can give me your best too. You must master your impulse toward ungenerosity – or it will be your undoing.”

But Cain doesn’t listen. He’s blind to the truth that God offers him. And so he goes out and kills his brother Abel because he would rather get rid of him than have to deal with him. He doesn’t want to have to see him anymore. Cain becomes a fugitive and a haunted man and a great chasm opens up in the human story. And so in this small exchange about generosity and ungenerosity begins the human love affair with sin.

One of the first things that people noticed about the earliest Christians was how they treated one another. “See how they love each other!” people said. And so the Christian way of life is a way of self-giving – of our hearts, of our energy, of our intellects, of our prayers, of our money – because

that is our vocation as humans and there isn’t anything else that is ever going to make us happy. Christians give themselves away.

Being a Christian doesn’t mean signing on to a set of doctrines carved in stone long ago. Being a Christian means becoming a complete human being, just as Jesus did. And a complete human being is someone who sees the full humanity of every other person and shapes their life around that vision of oneness. We are all part of one other. This is part of what we mean by the word “communion,” and it is a life-long process. Which is why Jesus had to talk about it over and over and over again.

When we’re babies, we can’t tell the difference between ourselves and our mothers. As we grow a little, we begin to recognize other people as separate from us. Take Elana, Josh and Hannah’s little girl, for instance. She will be one in a few weeks. Her first word was “Hi!” She says it all the time. She is beginning to understand the separateness of other people – that they are greetable. She salutes their separateness and their individuality as they come and go.

Odd as it may sound, some people stay at this level of development their whole lives. Sure, they get taller and they go to school and then to college and they work for a living, they subscribe to Scientific American and they travel the world, but they never go further than recognizing others as separate. And if you stay stuck there, the separateness of others becomes a problem, because life is hard and we need to compete to survive and so other people become obstacles and you need to cling to your money because there is nothing else that makes you feel safe. This is an ungenerous way to live. So you see that the way we encounter and understand other people is often reflected in how we handle money. That’s why Abraham said to the rich man that you can’t be persuaded into generosity or argued into generosity – it just happens to you if the eyes of your heart are open.

Being a Christian means taking the next step, to understanding that while others may be separate from you, they are still like you in every important respect. Or, said another way, you are like everyone else. This is why the Bible makes clear in its own pre-scientific way that all of humanity comes from one family, the family of Noah. If you’re lucky, if

your eyes are open, God will give you glimpses of this.

Here's a story about I glimpse I was given. Roll back to the early 1980s, when the homeless population in New York City skyrocketed. I was living in Brooklyn Heights and my church began a shelter program with the other churches in which homeless men were housed and fed each night in one or another of the churches.

I was a volunteer in this program (this was before I was ordained), and one night in the deepest part of winter I was assigned to host a group of men in the basement of the Presbyterian Church in Brooklyn Heights along with another volunteer. Because it was bitterly cold that day, we were told in advance that we would have more guests than usual. At 6:00pm, forty-men were dropped off from a city shelter bus at the church. The other volunteer and I chatted for awhile with them. Then the other volunteer said, "I don't feel so well." She ran to the bathroom and began vomiting. I sent her home. That left me with 42 guys, 15 pounds of stew beef, and a 1960s industrial stove. As the men rested on their cots, I dashed into the church kitchen and made my best beef stew recipe - with vegetables, of course - rice, garlic bread, salad. I set the long tables. It was like the feeding of the 5,000, Brooklyn style. All this took a couple of hours. It was really fun. I was very proud of myself. The men were very patient as I rushed around.

Finally, I served the food. They loved it. There was kind of a glow over the guys as they ate my amazing stew. When everyone had finished, I said, "How did you like it?" There was a lovely little pause, and then one man said carefully, "Well, the peas were a little overdone."

And suddenly my eyes were open. This was a real human being in front of me, not an object of my compassion.

It was a long cold night. Those guys snored all night long. They slept on their cots as if they were in the bosom of Abraham. As I lay on my cot at the end of the row of 42 other cots, I looked out the windows of the basement as snow fell, and I thought long and hard about my life.

This week, think about your relationships. Your relationship with God, your relationship with your family and friends and colleagues, your relationship with your kids, your relationships with people at St. Mark's. If your relationships could speak, what would they say? Are your relationships ungenerous - critical, careless, grasping, withholding? Do you like throwing your weight around, capturing the moral high ground, putting yourself first in the nicest possible way? Are you a "my way or the highway" kind of person? Are you tight with your money, your love, your approval, your kindness? Are you getting lonely on the stage of your own life? Do you feel like a fugitive in your own skin? Is your life in New Canaan feeling a little like life in Hades?

When you come to the altar rail to receive Communion today, look at your hands. They will be empty. Remember, they are holy hands, made to love and to heal the sores of this world. Remember that God is calling you to a way of life that more spacious and giving. It's what you were made for. And it's the only thing that will ever make you happy.

Let us pray.

Dear God, we come before you today

Grateful for what we have.

Help us loosen our grip on what we have

So that others may live also.

Heal our relationships

And open our eyes

So that Your love and Your grace

May flow freely among us.

We pray in the name of Jesus, the Generous One.

Who gave His life so that we all may be One.

Amen.