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Trinity Episcopal Church

Amos 6: 1a, 4 – 7
1 Timothy 6: 6 – 19

Psalm 146
Luke 16: 19 – 31

Last month, when Mary Marwitz and I were in Santiago de Compostela, Spain for two weeks, we saw homeless people sleeping on benches or in doorways along the sidewalk. We were also accosted by many beggars, either coming by our table at an outdoor café or in the same place on the streets, day after day, on their knees. In addition, there were a variety of musicians (buskers) playing throughout the tourist-filled, historic part of the city, each with their hats, or boxes, or instrument cases open to receive donations. And while we each put money into some of the musicians' containers at different times, we didn't ever give to the beggars that we encountered.

Why the difference? We talked about it, probably more than once, and while I can't speak for Mary, I am a product of our culture just like each of you, with the same biases and the same Puritan-influenced American work ethic as anyone else. We both saw something of value in the music we enjoyed, so we gave to honor the musicians' contributions to our well-being. I didn't feel that way about the beggars, and yet, each time I either ignored or firmly replied 'no' to a beggar, I said to myself, "That could be Jesus!" Many of the street beggars were part of a gypsy clan that were known to come into the city day after day and take up their regular spots. My judgmental perspective sees them as people preying on society and providing nothing in return (as far as I know). But I wonder if from *their* perspective that this *is* their job – that in return for spending hours on their knees or wandering the streets, they are earning this money. Unemployment in Spain is currently around 20% for the total population, and it is hovering around 44% for youth and young adults. So how could I possibly expect people to be working more productively when there isn't anywhere near enough work – or more precisely pay – to go around? I really am one of the rich man's five brothers in Jesus' parable. Perhaps some of you are, too.

It is so easy to criticize and judge people, when in reality, we don't have any idea how people get to where they are. It's too easy to rationalize our response. It's their own fault, we say to ourselves. There are agencies out there to help people. There are jobs to be had, if people really *want* to work. If we give them money, they'll just go spend it on alcohol or cigarettes or drugs. If only they had stayed in school, they'd be better equipped for the job market. If only she hadn't had so many babies, she could be out working or at least not have so many mouths to feed. If he just spoke good English, *somebody* would hire him.

Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that we tell ourselves things like this in order to push away and protect ourselves from the pain around us. To keep that pain at arm's length, like the rich man keeps Lazarus outside his gates. Taylor says that it's human nature to rationalize why people are the way they are, because it enables us to go on with what we're about unencumbered by others' situations. If we rationalize them away, then we don't have to worry about them or what we can and/or should do to help.

Homeless people and beggars are not so visible in Statesboro, but they're here. And there are lots of people in Bulloch County living on the edge of a precipice, wondering how they are going to feed their family tonight. Perhaps people inherit poverty and debt just as easily as they do their genetic makeup. N. T. Wright describes the poor living on the fringes of societies around the world – in garbage dumps or makeshift shacks of scrounged material, in the shadows of suburbs and tall, gleaming

skyscrapers. “They have been born into debt,” Wright says, “and in debt they will stay, through the fault of someone rich and powerful who signed away their rights (their lives) a generation or two ago in return for an arms deal, or a new royal palace, or a fat overseas bank account.”

Taylor writes that people who have inherited poverty hear the starting gun go off, but they don't even know which way to run. And it doesn't really matter, because they don't have the right shoes and they can't afford the registration fee for the race. They never got a copy of the rules and, besides, they're in terrible physical shape. Other people, more well-off people, look at them and see “Loser!” written in scarlet on their forehead. And it's been that way for so many centuries.

Taylor suggests that those other people, the more well-off ones, who start so much farther ahead in the race, often believe that the difference between them and “the losers” is so great that God must have something to do with it. Certainly the rich man in Jesus' parable feels this way. If they're doing well, then God must be happy with them and is blessing them. And for the other poor schmucks? Well, God must *not* be happy with them and God is punishing them. That's more akin to the Prosperity Gospel, but it isn't what Scripture tells us.

To flaunt wealth, to live luxuriously while others are homeless, hungry, and dressed in rags, is to deny the common humanity that we are meant to share. That message is loud and clear in all of our lessons today in one way or another. Amos warns us that all of our life-style choices, that is, how we use the resources with which we've been blessed, have spiritual consequences far beyond ourselves. The Psalmist points out that God is on the side of the underdogs: the oppressed, the hungry, the destitute, the disabled, the captive and everyone else who live on the margins of society. In Timothy, we are admonished not to put our trust in riches of this world which have no value in eternal life, and to be generous and ready to share our blessings. In Luke, we encounter Lazarus, who just like the beggars in Santiago, appears not to do any useful work or make any productive contribution to society. And yet, *he* is the one who is given the place of honor in God's kingdom.

Matthew Fox writes that “the opposite of guilt is not innocence – no one is innocent; the opposite of guilt is responsibility. We choose to wallow in our guilt rather than to take responsibility for social justice and healing.” Barbara Brown Taylor agrees. She writes that “the point of this story [in Luke] is to tell us a truth we need to know in hopes that it will change our lives. Otherwise, God couldn't care less about our guilt. The only thing guilt is good for,” Taylor continues, “is to move us to change. If it does not do that, then it is just a sorry substitute for new life. ‘I can't do what you're asking me, God, but I sure do feel bad about it. Will you settle for that?’”

The good news is that this story that Jesus tells us is a story told to help us, not convict us. It's to point us in the right direction. We live in a culture where CEOs and top executives make hundreds of times the median wage of their employees, and where the quality of healthcare and legal care and schooling is so often tied to one's economic status. Part of our problem is that we settle for so much less than what God wants for us. Like the rich man in the story with his fine clothes and opulent dinners, we are quite content with the ‘shiny things’ of this world, while God wants to give us the keys to the Kingdom. We are content to live in a world where there are homeless people and beggars, while God wants us to be brothers and sisters in our common humanity. We are content to cherry-pick the parts of Scripture that appear to support our choices in life, while God wants to bring us new, resurrected life.

Jesus' story is for us – we, the five brothers of the rich man. Eric Law, whose book “Holy Currencies” is about keeping our blessings – our resources – flowing, writes that “economic wellness is

not about how much financial security we have for ourselves or for our church. It is not about accumulating money; it is about how money flows through our church and through us, creating blessings that sustain the wider community.” Economic wellness means keeping our resources cycling and flowing in ways that help people at Trinity and people in our wider community thrive and flourish.

We’re asking you to prayerfully consider your pledges of Time, Talent and Treasure as we seek to recycle our blessings. Part of that prayerful consideration is to remind ourselves of the blessings that God constantly showers upon us. To name them and to acknowledge them. Because sometimes we can be like fish who take the water all around them for granted until suddenly, they aren’t in the water anymore. So here’s our exercise for today: (*Holy Currencies, p 71*)

1. Distribute 3x5 cards and pens/pencils
2. Invite everyone to complete these two sentences:
 - a. A blessing I received this past week was...
 - b. In remembering this blessing, I give thanks to...
3. Invite people to share if they wish
4. Invite Genevieve to share a gesture of thanksgiving and ask everyone to repeat it, creating kind of a dance together.
5. Collect the cards and bless them. +