

The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
Pastor J. Stewart Hardy

Sunday, September 26, 2004
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

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

This morning I want to talk to you about painful lessons. “Hey John, hey John, John. It was Chad. Chad was the name of the manager of the restaurant where I was training July in Dallas, Texas. “John, John, wake up.” He was drawing my attention to something I hadn’t noticed. It was my first day waiting tables on my own. No more training, I had passed all the written tests. Hah, Hah, written tests for waiters, believe it or not. I had passed all the learning, and now I was ready. I had tables of my own! John, because they called me John Stewart and not Stu Hardy, so that Mark, who was the General Manager, wouldn’t be given away as my son and my relationship with him.

“John, get out there! P4 and P6 are full already.” Where did they come from I wanted to know, where did these people come from? Who are they to sit themselves down on the patio, just when I am running salsa for another table, and what was that table number three wanted again? Was it peach iced tea and cold water, or was it cold water and coffee? Just what were these people doing to me! I went out and filled the orders for the people on the patio and came back and noticed that four businessmen at table 6, which was also mine, had not yet received their lunch. What was the kitchen up to? How could I be a perfect waiter and not have support from the kitchen staff? I went and checked in the kitchen. Nothing seemed to be ready yet, and then I talked to the manager. “What is happening, I’ve had an order in for table 6 and there is no food.” Chad walked quietly into the kitchen and spoke to Rafael, the head chef, and I could see Rafael shaking his head and raising his hands. Chad came out and said, “Are you sure you put the order in?” I said of course I did. He replied; “Let’s check your book.” I opened my book and guess what was there. The check for table 6. What was going to be the greatest day, of the greatest restaurant, that ever walked in Dallas, Texas, was turning out to be a rather painful experience.

Life was always a painful experience for Lazarus. He just didn’t have what it took to make it. He had no income, he was ill, and because he was ill, unclean, and begging on the streets he was an outcast. He couldn’t go to the synagogue, he couldn’t mix with people, he was stuck. The only place for him that seemed to offer any hope was the gateway of the richest guy in town. You will notice that Lazarus doesn’t ask for anything. He is not knocking on the door; he is not making a nuisance of himself. He is sitting out there in his misery, with the dogs, hoping against hope that some of the food that makes its way off the rich man’s table will some way get to him and he will at least eat. The rich man is inside. You will notice that he is wearing purple. I don’t know what the greatest label is these days for people. What is the greatest label, guys? Can anyone tell me? What are the great clothing labels? At any rate, he had top of the line clothing. It was dyed with purple, the best there was. He had the greatest of food and more than he knew what to do with, and everything was his. He is about to learn a very painful lesson.

You might think the painful lesson was death, you might think it came as punishment, you might think it came as just desserts for the way he lived, but it wasn't that. It was just natural death. Just the way Lazarus, himself, had died and it was after death that the whole point of the episode became obvious. Both of these people, the rich man and Lazarus, received the gift of resurrection. Both of them received the gift of life after death. Except, their positions have changed. The rich man finds himself in the extreme conditions of Hades, the place of the dead, where he is very, very thirsty and would do anything for a glass of cold water. It is rather like traveling in England. When you ask for a glass of cold water they ask if you would like ice in it and they proceed to add four little ice cubes about the size of your thumbnail into the water. The rich man was looking for some water. Just a drop would do. And then he notices that the poor man has also been given the gift of life, but he is now well nourished, and at ease, and over there where Lazarus can't quite get because of the large chasm or canyon between them, is Lazarus with Abraham.

Suddenly the rich man has seen Lazarus. You notice that I didn't see the people coming to table 4, and 6 on the patio. You notice that I didn't see that I hadn't handed the check in to the kitchen. The rich man hadn't noticed Lazarus at his gate. What misery and suffering have you and I missed? You see, it is not that the rich man doesn't see, and that it is not that the rich man is mean, or refuses to see, it is just that he doesn't see. He doesn't notice it. It is so easily done.

A couple of weeks ago, Barbara, my wife, who had been an AFS student in New Zealand, had her AFS sister here in Camp Hill staying with her. One of the things we did together was drive down to Baltimore. We had a great Saturday in Baltimore, went to the South Baltimore market where we had lunch and were heading off to see a show. As we were driving along the street I noticed a young man. He was standing by a letter box, where you deposit your mail for the post man. He didn't look well. He looked very pale. His top shirt was over his shoulder, and he was clinging to the mail box and leaning back with his eyes closed. As I drove past, I said to Barbara, and to her New Zealand AFS sister, "Would you look at that? Do you see what the drug culture does to people these days? Isn't that terrible that things like that can happen to such young people," and we drove on. I didn't see his need.

Still the rich man hasn't seen what is completely in front of him and aware of where his life has led him. He asks Abraham to go to his brothers, or to send word to his brothers, so that they may be more alert and more awake to the human suffering and need that is right in front of them. That through in what they have in excess of what they need, they might be able to give something to make a difference to those that don't have enough. But Abraham reminds the rich man, that they have just as much as he had before he got to where he was. They had, Abraham said, the Prophets and Moses. And, you and I have the scriptures. The question then really becomes, how are we to live with them?

I would like to be able to tell you that you could open the Bible and find a clear financial prescription to wealth and security, but I am afraid I have to tell you that the Bible won't do that for you. I would like to be able to tell you if you opened the Bible, you would have a

clear blueprint for how you are live each day of your life and each minute of your day. But I am afraid I have to tell you that you won't find that in the Bible. Instead, what the Bible will ask you to do is to come to the stories that it tells and to the insights that it gives, and then having given you the understanding and the insights, ask you to apply that wisdom to what is in front of you. You see the rich man could have behaved quite differently, had he bothered to look around him, and see the suffering of Lazarus right at his gate, it wouldn't have cost the rich man one red cent to send out the scrapings off the plates from his table to Lazarus.

Back at the restaurant when I realized what I had done, Chad took over for me. He put his hand on my shoulder, and said, "Relax. Anybody who has ever waited tables in their life, has done this at least once, and some of us," he said grinning, "have done it more than once, so you are not on your own." He took the check from me and he walked back into the kitchen and gave it to Rafael and talked to him. Rafael came over to me and said, "It's o.k., John. We will put a rush on this and it will be out in just a minute," and patted me on the shoulder. Then, Chad went over to table 6 and spoke to the businessmen and offered them a free meal. Then he came back to back and said, "Now, it is your turn." I said, "My turn?" He said, "Yes, I want you to go over to table 6, tell them what happened, be honest and truthful, and apologize to them." They accepted my apology with kindness.

Thinking about that, and thinking about what happened with myself in Baltimore, I realized what I ought to have done. I ought to have stopped the car when I saw the young man at the letterbox. I ought to have gotten out and walked over to him and spoken to him, and asked him was he o.k.? Did he need any help? Then try to find out what was going on for him, and if necessary, I had a cell phone right there on my hip. I could have summoned aid to help him and it wouldn't have cost me one red cent. But, I didn't. You see, just like the table, now I have learned a painful lesson. The lesson is, to be alert. To pay attention to the people right around me, and when I see need or suffering, to do what I can to try to make that better for the person bearing it. In that way I respond to what the scripture is telling me. When, with you, I come here to this table, I am reminded of what God, in Christ, has done for us. For Christ died, ultimately, to relieve us all of our failures. To offer us forgiveness and to give us a new start. If you like, this table, with the communion bread and wine, and with the forgiveness it offers and the powers it gives us to live anew as children of God, is a message sent at the behest of a rich man. Although Lazarus didn't bring it to us, look what Christ has given us through the glory of God. How can we not then live toward others with the same compassion, the same kindness, the same caring, that God in Christ has lived for us?

Amen.

Copyright © 2004, J. Stewart Hardy. All rights reserved.