

*Finding the Sacred Center*  
Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
September 25, 2016  
Jill R. Russell

Texts:       Jeremiah 32.1-3a, 6-15;  
              Psalm 91.1-6, 14-16;  
              1 Timothy 6.6-19;  
              Luke 16.19-31

It's been one of those weeks again when we cannot close our eyes and pretend we don't see it: the reality – the stark and hard truth – that the social fabric of our society has been and continues to be torn apart. The great chasm that Jesus puts before us in Luke today is wide and deep and feels utterly impossible to cross. Last weekend began with another terrorist setting off bombs in American cities. This week more black bodies dead in the street after confrontation with police. We've been here before too many times. Whether we grieve or rage or want to close our eyes and change the channel – the chasm – the great chasm that divides in so many directions is fixed before us and we cannot pretend otherwise.

People are running scared. And fear is a breeding ground for violence. Part of the despair is that this is not just overt racism although there is plenty of that going around. It far more complicated than that. It's what strikes you as threatening in the nanosecond before your conscious brain kicks in – what we've come to call implicit bias. It's rampant across our country – it's in all of us. And it's just as deadly as the ugly, nasty obvious kind.

So I don't feel ready to leave the text from last Sunday. Jeremiah 8 gives voice to what I know has been on the heart and soul of so many of us for days: "My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick.... Oh that my head was a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of God's poor people."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah 8.18 and 9.1, NRSV

I reached out to some of my friends and colleagues this week who are African American. I wondered what was on their hearts. I wondered what they would say to us if they could be standing before us today. I knew that even if they were bone, weary tired their faith in God is unwavering, their commitments to justice and the proclamation of the good news will not be silenced and I wondered what they had to say to us.

The Rev. Dr. Chris Dorsey who has preached here many times said “it seems we live in a society that values singing praises to a flag more than it values the bodies of black people.” Professor Duane Loynes who preached here this summer said “This is not a new problem for blacks - it has *always* been this way. Black pastors, professors, laypeople, students, families, etc., have always labored under the burden of a law enforcement system where blacks can be killed capriciously even when 100% compliant and 100% innocent. We have always been, as Raha Jorjani pointed out in an Op-Ed in the *Washington Post* last year, refugees seeking asylum from and yet in the very land that afflicts us.”

It really is just too much. It feels way too hard. And yet I know we are not alone. Jeremiah knew this level of despair; the hopelessness of a society that is overrun by violence and corruption. Today’s text finds Jeremiah under house arrest in the palace of the king. All indications point toward destruction for the city. People are being deported made to live as exiles in a foreign land. Somehow when his reminders about the heart of their faith do not move them to change when his ranting and raving falls on deaf ears – somehow he finds the will to make one last appeal. In this act of buying land he bears witness to his trust in God to bring them home again one day. And still they are not moved.

Fast forward to Jesus in this text from Luke who sees in his day what Jeremiah experienced before him. He tells this story about the rich man and Lazarus. Ched Myers, an activist and theologian, reminds us that this passage before us is not a parable<sup>2</sup>. Don’t start lining up all the details and trying to trace how they teach us about the afterlife and how the time of

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<sup>2</sup> Ched Myers, *Radical Discipleship*, “*The Rich Man and Lazarus: Warning Tale and Interpretive Key to Luke*” <https://radicaldiscipleship.net/2016/09/22/the-rich-man-and-lazarus-warning-tale-and-interpretive-key-to-luke/>

judgment will go. As Gordon so helpfully and playfully reminded last week, that isn't even how we should read the parables. Myers described this story as a warning tale that is like a political cartoon to reveal in stark caricature how cruel the world of inequality is for all of us.

He goes further to say that this warning tale is fashioned after the apocalyptic literature that was common among the Jewish people of that time. We know the word *apocalypse* as the end of the world but the literal meaning of the word is uncovering; the lifting of a veil to reveal some truth. Myers claims that this lifting of the veil happens in two ways: "By stripping away layers of denial and propaganda that keep us distracted, to expose the realities of suffering and injustice - seeing the world as it really is from the perspective of the poor and victims of violence." We see this going in the way that Jesus describes the suffering of Lazarus in such vivid, visceral detail. The second unveiling that happens with apocalyptic literature according to Myers is "by transfusing our dulled and dumbed-down imaginations with visions of the world as it really could and should be from the perspective of divine love and justice." Myers calls this the "apocalyptic double vision: to see the world enslaved on the one hand and to see it liberated on the other."<sup>3</sup>

In other words, if you have been able to ignore the great chasms that divide us, it's time to open your eyes - to hear the stories - to look at the consequences, the pain, and the suffering. The world is enslaved and we need to tell the truth about it. And at the same time we need to have the holy imagination to see this world as liberated. When I say this world, I mean this world in our time.

The Rev. Denise Kingdom Grier sent her word to us last evening. She wrote: "I don't want to try to convince (your congregation) to hear me, see more stand in my pain. I long for them to see themselves...that is the way forward. Together." She sent a powerful poem for us that she wrote. I will send it out tomorrow by email and have few hard copies on the welcome center desk today for those who don't get or use email. This poem is a good

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<sup>3</sup> All quotes throughout this section are from the article by Ched Myers referenced above.

place to begin as we try to see ourselves more clearly and find our way forward.

It's clear to me that we need to increase our capacity to recognize the suffering that the great chasm of inequality is imposing on all sides of the chasm. The way that recognition has been growing for me has been two-fold. One is in the power of story: in listening to people's stories and be willing to tell more of my own. When we make the space for people to speak the unvarnished truth of their lives without getting defensive or judgmental, we begin to receive the unveiling that Jesus is doing in this text today. The second dimension goes beyond hearing the personal stories to begin connecting the dots between them. Go beyond hearing the consequences of the great chasm of inequality to figuring out what is the structure of this chasm. What is propping it up? And how can we together begin to pull the thing down?

Remember it is a double vision. It's not just seeing the ways that the world is enslaved but also to envision its liberation. Friends, I have to tell you – I think we struggle with this second side of the vision as much if not more than we do with the first. Something sparked for me this week when sitting in a yoga class on Wednesday morning. The instructor was reflecting on the back and forth of nature this time of year....it can feel like fall one day and summer the next as the natural world is finding its new balance. She used that metaphor to remind us that physical balance in the body comes from the core. Our ability to stand firm despite the forces that might be pulling at us is found as we give attention to our center and increase the strength of our center.

I want to offer up that wisdom to us today when it comes to the question of how we can envision the liberation that is driving Jesus to give to us such a vivid story today. Remember God's intention for us as it comes to us from Psalm 91 today. We are, all of us, to live in the shelter of the Most High, to experience God as our refuge and fortress – the One in whom we trust – to find that sacred center that will hold us when the terror of the night and the destruction of the noon day is pulling at us from all side. 1 Timothy adds another dimension. It's not just finding our sacred center where we remember the promises of God. There is also an active strengthening of

that center as we pursue in the words of the text “righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness.”

My colleague, Rev. Randy Smit, has been reminding me and others in recent weeks, something someone had shared with him. Perhaps the greatest gift we have as a starting point for both finding and strengthening that sacred center is to simply tune into our breath.... slow down the incessant DOING that makes us unconscious to the world around us and the world inside of us – To just BE.

I invite us all right now as we settle into the silent prayer for meditation to close your eyes, quiet your mind, settle into your body, and pay attention to your breath. Knowing that the world is pulling all of us apart, settle in this moment into that sacred center where we are one with God and therefore one with each other and let that vision ground us for the work that is before us. Let us pray.