



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 16 – Proper 21 (C)

At the Edge

[RCL] Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15; Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16; 1 Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31

If you have ever had occasion to stand at the edge of the Grand Canyon, you know that its vastness is difficult to take in. The distances and depths appear unreal to human eyes unaccustomed to such magnitude. Our brains, dazzled and dismayed by the impossible scale, convert the ruddy vistas into a flattened expanse of painted scenery. We struggle to retain a sense of recognizable proportion. It is a defense mechanism, perhaps, against the sense of our own smallness in the bigger scheme of things.

But vast it remains, this canyon, unmoved by the domesticating impulses of our consciousness. *I am what I am*, it says, carved by water and wind and time, unapologetic for its inscrutability.

And so, you have a choice to make, standing at its edge. You can come as a pilgrim, trying and failing to comprehend what is beyond your comprehension, being humbled and altered in the process. Or you can come as a consumer of the merely picturesque: taking a selfie, seeing what you wish to see, but remaining unchanged by it. There are no other options available here at the place where earth and ego break open for honest inspection.

When it comes down to it, there are no other options available in life, either. And in today's Gospel, Jesus' parable explores this choice we are all compelled to make at one point or another, between pilgrim and consumer.

We've heard this parable many times, perhaps, but its vastness might evade us, too. The rich man, who is given no name, is not so much a stand-in for the evil aristocracy as he is an everyman, an *everyperson*. He is, like any of us, ensconced in a world in which he presumes to play a starring role. Everything, it seems, exists for him to feast upon or ignore as he so chooses. And if there is a beggar at the gates of his consciousness, he couldn't say; he has either ignored that person or never stepped out to look for them in the first place. When faced with the vastness of the world, both its suffering and its beauty, this rich man has only seen it as a backdrop to his own picturesque existence, against which he consumes experiences and playacts at being alive.

If, on the other hand, he had ever dared to step out beyond himself, to be dazzled and dismayed by the impossible scale of that which he cannot understand or control or consume, then he would have found Lazarus right there waiting—one who *does* have a name; one who is not an abstraction, but a living truth, deep and real as the canyon. And in doing so, the rich man might have discovered his own true name as well, his own true self, which can only ever be discerned in one's relationship to the whole. But his tragedy—and potentially ours—is that this does not happen.

Instead, we pass by the canyons and the beggars and the deep questions and the jagged shards of grace strewn in our path, determined to look no further than the vistas we find pleasant and the feasts we know how to eat. We will never become pilgrims undone by the sense that we are only a small part of a big world. We will never be saved by the rest found in that smallness. We will never let the picturesque give way to what is real, around us or within us.

And the result, as Jesus illustrates in this parable, is a soul incapable of escaping the earthen crust of self-interest. The rich man, writhing with thirst in Hades, looks out at the grand canyon of longing between himself and Lazarus, and yet is still imprisoned by his lingering consumerism. *Bring me water*, he says, *save my family, assuage my fears*. He does not realize, even now, that if he would simply look upon Lazarus as a brother and not as a vehicle for the fulfillment of his own needs, that endless thirst would be assuaged from within the well of his own spirit.

The chasm is not the problem; that is simply the vast inscrutability of God around which all must gather and account for our lives. It is how we choose to stand at its edge that will either save us or condemn us to suffer.

This, then, also gives new texture to the instructions in today's portion of 1 Timothy, a passage which is too easily reduced to a somewhat dithering engagement of the question of money, especially among communities with economic privilege. Money is fine, we like to say, just not the *love* of money, as if that solved the dilemma of our emptiness! As if we were already experts at equanimity in the fluctuation of our material fortunes! We shouldn't settle for pat answers here. Ask Lazarus; ask a person living paycheck to paycheck; ask one who cannot feed their family about love of money; they might not have such lofty dismissals of its importance.

The nature of money is not the heart of the problem here. As is always the case with Christian discipleship, our *hearts* are the heart of the problem. They are too easily compromised by an inclination for the picturesque. The Epistle's concern is that, instead, our hearts remain attentive to the vastness of the call placed upon them—to behold the chasm between us and God and live as though it is bridged by the *righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness* of Christ, who has imparted these same things to us.

In other words, the author invites us again into that pilgrim way of seeing the world, dazzled and dismayed by the new creation wrought by the one who dwells in inapproachable light and yet is seen in the face of

the Risen Jesus. His good news has formed an incomprehensible fissure in our understanding of how the world works, and we must be willing to let it be what it is. “I am what I am,” says the canyon.

If we do not, if we remain consumers of holy experience rather than pilgrims at the edge of God, we can do all sorts of meritorious works, and we can hoard our money or we can give it all away to please our own egos, but we will never perceive *the life that really is life*. We will live and die still crying out for a drop of living water.

How to shift, then? How to be saved from our thirst? How to surrender oneself to the canyon which refuses to coddle our senses?

You do not have to go to Arizona. You do not have to go anywhere in particular, really. You simply have to give away the notion that the world is mere scenery and that any one of us is the star. How lonely, ultimately; how sad and futile to live such a life, with a thousand selfies and not a single real glimpse of yourself.

Instead, just as Jesus did in that strange, vast mystery of incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension, we must give our own humanity over to God and to our neighbor. We must give over our need for intelligible, picturesque vantage points and submit to that which we cannot make sense of nor consume. We must give over our merit and our regret and our insatiable hungers. We must become part of a whole, or rather, we must remember that we always were part of it. We must stand at the edge of the canyon and let it humble us into the pilgrims we were meant to be.

And perhaps then, with our souls carried on a wind we cannot harness, somewhere from beyond the depths, we might just hear our own true name at last.

The Rev. Phil Hooper serves as rector of Saint Anne Episcopal Church, West Chester, in the Diocese of Southern Ohio. He is a contributor to several Episcopal publications and a board member of the Center for Deep Green Faith. His sermons and other writings can be found at www.byanotherroad.com.