

**Proper 21**  
**Luke 16:19-31**

This morning's Gospel story reminds me of the very old joke about the man who was in his house when it began to rain heavily. Pretty soon the roads flooded and the property flooded. The water was rapidly rising in the first floor of his house. He ran up to the second floor and prayed fervently that God would rescue him from disaster. As he prayed, a row boat came up to him and the people in the boat yelled at him to jump in. But he said, "No, no, no. God will save me!" The flood waters continued to rise and he had to move to the roof. A helicopter hovered over him and sent down a rescue basket. He waved them away and yelled back to them, "God will save me!" So the helicopter flew away. But pretty soon the waters covered his house; he could no longer tread water and drowned. When he came face to face with God, he asked God, "God, why didn't you save me from the flood? Why did you let me drown?" God answered, "I sent a rowboat and a helicopter but you waved them both off. What else was I going to do?"

Abraham said to the rich man, "I sent Moses and the prophets. If you didn't hear them, why would your brothers listen to anyone else?" "In fact," said Abraham, "there is now such a great chasm between you and those of us on this side, that there is no crossing either way. It's too late."

This story makes me uncomfortable – really uncomfortable. The scene it sets up is too close to where the world is today. The chasm between rich and poor continues to widen and the large majority of those with the power to narrow that chasm look away. Their lives become more comfortable by comparison while those on the other side of the worldly chasm see no way to get across. Unlike the man in the flood, they are not being thrown life lines and there are no rowboats trying to save them. If anything, their lifelines are being pulled away.

I know that most if not all of us in this parish don't have the resources to change the state of the world – the violence, the poverty, the disease, the lack of education. We do what we can by sending checks to organizations that do try to affect a change in these situations.

There is poverty, homelessness, hunger, and unemployment in the US. We do what we can by sending checks to organizations that do try to affect a change in these situations.

In our own community, there is also poverty, homelessness, mental illness, hunger, and unemployment. We do what we can by sending checks to organizations that do try to affect a change in these situations – IHS, the Salvation Army, Catholic Charities, and other local organizations. Some do give a few hours a month in this parish to IHS, YO! House, food distribution, Family Promise. In the parish office we provide daily food and financial assistance to those who come to us for help. We give out an average of 6-10 bags of food every day and on Thursdays we provide \$50 from the Rector's Discretionary Fund to those in our zip code who come to use needing help with rent and utilities. That fund, by the way, is used only to assist those in need – that's at the rector's discretion, with the vestry's guidance, and in line with our charge as Christians.

But we still have people living on the streets, holding their hands out for money. We still have people living in the parks, even though one or both parents have jobs – at minimum wage or less. We still have teenagers and young people who have no shelter, for a variety of reasons. Sometimes we give money or food or clothing; sometimes we don't.

Sometimes we wish the city and state would just do their jobs and get “these people” off the streets. Sometimes we tell one another that it’s because they’re mentally ill and don’t want to go into shelters or that they’re off their meds and can’t be helped. Sometimes we don’t have time or interest in getting involved; we have too many other things to do. Sometimes we remark that there are homeless shelters but that those who need them won’t use them.

But we make our own decisions based on our own sets of values and our own perceptions of our own needs to determine how much we’ll share of our own resources and to whom.

That’s our right as individuals and responsible citizens. We earned our resources; we can decide how we’re going to use them.

That was the right of the rich man when he decided that he would not give to Lazarus.

When the rich man found himself in hell, he wanted Abraham to send messengers to his brothers so that they would at least be forewarned of the consequences of their actions and so they could change their ways before they died. He didn’t want to see them in hell with him. But Abraham said, they’ve already heard what God expects of them with their resources and how they treat others. Why would they listen now?

For most of us it’s easy to write checks – that assuages whatever guilt we might have about having so much more than others, about passing by those who have their hands out for help. But God knows we’re not going to give them money – they’ll only use it for drugs and alcohol. We’re not going to support their habits and addictions. And we feel fine making those judgments on people we don’t even know. It’s our hard-earned money, after all.

Have we listened to what Moses and the prophets have said to us? Of course we have. Remember what Micah said when he was asked what God expects of us: To love mercy, to do justice, and to walk humbly with God. But that wasn’t the end: Remember what Jesus said to us: Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me. ... When I was thirsty, you gave me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not welcome me; naked and you did not give me clothing,” and on and on. We all know what Jesus said. And twice in that 25<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew, Jesus is very clear that those who listen to him will be welcomed into eternal life and those who do not do as he says will end up in the eternal fire with the devil and his angels.

I don’t think Jesus is coming out of anger here. I think what he’s saying is based in sadness. And I think what Abraham is saying to the rich man also has its foundation in sadness. We are too busy or blind or have more important places to put our resources than to feed the hungry or clothe the naked. After all, didn’t Jesus also say that the poor will always be with us?

We find reasons to make the choices we make. And we find reasons to not make other choices. One of the things that has made me especially sad here at St Clement’s is that requests for food for food distribution and for money to bring back to health the rector’s discretionary account are pretty much met with silence. We do have one family foundation that provides us with \$8000 a year specifically for food. I guess that lets the rest of us off the hook. We don’t have to go to Costco and get an \$8 or \$10 or \$12 case of canned food and bring it over to the parish. We don’t have to write a check to be given to God only knows who. Over the last couple of years, I have dreaded sending out emails asking for food or the discretionary fund. Except for a few people, I

have learned the requests will be met with silence. Until about three or four years ago, we had a healthy rector's discretionary fund and every request for food resulted in stacks of cases of canned vegetables and meats and soups and even too many bags of rice.

But we all have our reasons for not supporting or for stopping our support of these ministries. If anything, we'll write a check because it takes too long to actually go to Costco or Walmart or Safeway and buy the food and bring it over to the parish. Too many of us don't have that kind of time. Somebody else can do it.

After all, some of us spend at least 6 or 8 hours a month making or giving out food. What more does God want? When can we do our own things? Why does Liz badger us so much about giving more? It's either our pledges or donations or time... She always talks about money. We give to plenty of places – why should we give more to the church? Isn't it all God's work? And we're tired of being reminded that we don't give enough or do enough. She should be thanking us for what we do do.

So we find reasons to not give to God's work through God's church. We are better at making those judgments than Liz or God. We know better than Liz what God needs, what God expects of us, and where God wants our resources to go. And it's not only the church.

We are God's lifeline to the world. We are God's lifeline to this community. If you will – we are God's rowboat and helicopter to those who have less here in Honolulu and around the world. We are those whom God wants to be the hands and feet and words and actions of Jesus.

So there it is. I know this will make some angry. I hope it makes some sad. I hope it at least makes all of us consider what Moses and the prophets and Jesus have called us to do as people of faith.

Amen.

Elizabeth A. Zivanov+  
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