



St. Luke's East Hampton

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Benjamin Shambaugh

September 28, 2025;

Proper 21C: [Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15](#), [1 Timothy 6:6-19](#), [Luke 16:19-31](#)

When I moved to New York in 1985, the city felt rougher than it does today. I lived in Chelsea before Chelsea piers and the High Line were created, when the meat packing district was sketchy, and when tourists were told to avoid Times Square. I remember walking over bodies to get to the subway and having my senses assaulted by the sights and smells as I walked down toward the tracks. After a while, however – despite the seminary's heavy emphasis on social justice and almost daily hands-on work with the poor – I became desensitized. I stopped smelling the smells and hearing the noise. I got focused on my work and started seeing the people lying on cardboard more as obstacles in my way than as human beings in need of help. I wasn't the only one who was desensitized. This was the time of Tom Wolfe's "Masters of the Universe," when my friends in finance never took the subway or buses and didn't notice homeless people unless they tried to wash their car windows with a squeegee or "help" them get a cab on the street. These days, with the government hiding statistics or stopping the collection of data on things like climate change or hunger and homelessness, it's even easier to hide behind our hedges or bury our heads in the most beautiful sand and not see the people or problems around us. Yet, as this morning's gospel reminds us, they are still there. Did you notice how Lazarus is named but the rich man is not? Lazarus is a specific person. The rich man is all of us. Though we may not feel like we have the power or responsibility to do something, this gospel tells us that we actually have both.

And what about our other readings? Today's reading from Jeremiah places us in the time just before the Exile in Babylon. The armies of Israel have been defeated and the Babylonians are at the gates. The people of Israel are about to be deported, and, in the midst of all that chaos, the prophet Jeremiah does one final thing. Jeremiah buys a small plot of land, then places the deed in a jar and buries it in a field. He doesn't know what will happen next or when he will ever come home. He knows that when he does, this land – and the deed – will be waiting for him. In this act, Jeremiah models dignity in the midst of destruction, hope in the midst of despair, and trust in a future when that future seems very far away.

Our second reading is from Paul's first letter to Timothy. Here the lectionary continues an ongoing series of reflections about money. "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains." Ever met anyone like that? Note that this passage isn't about what's in our bank accounts. It is about what's in our hearts. Like last week's lesson, today's words are about our motivation, our mission, and our goals. Paul is asking what we love and how we will make that love real, how we will live it out. He is challenging us to "Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called." For him, the way to do this is clear: "Do good, be rich in good works, generous and ready to share, thus storing up the treasure of a good foundation for the future, and taking hold of the life that really is life."

In my short time here, I have seen many people doing these things in a multitude of ways. Members of this congregation and this community are extremely generous, rich in good works, and eager to share. As said by one of the speakers at Elaine Jones' funeral on Wednesday, this is a place where people hold one another up and strive to do the right thing. That said, we – and in that we, I include me – can become desensitized and no longer notice the people lying on cardboard mats or holding up cardboard signs. We can become numb to the news of another mass shooting, another crisis in Gaza or Ukraine, and another story of injustice right here at home. Despite all our generosity and best intentions, we can develop a bit of compassion fatigue and think we have done enough, that our work is done, and that the plight of the poor is because of life circumstances that are completely unconnected to our own. Today's readings remind us that none of those things are true.

During the summer, I have been using the "Life is short" blessing, which includes the line "be quick to love and make haste to be kind." Jeremiah's small act of hope has been a source of inspiration for thousands of years. More than that, it actually worked. Even if he didn't come back to that field himself, the people in exile did. Even if he didn't come back to the field himself, it gave his people hope. We live in very difficult and divided times. Many people feel like their world is falling apart and everything they know and love is being destroyed. They are filled with fear, and anger, and pain. What act of hope can you give to them to turn those things around? What can you do to help? Though we might not always see them, those in need are right in front of us. What small – and more than small - act of kindness can you share with them? As this gospel reminds us, we will be judged for what we do or do not do. Remember after all, that in caring for others, you are caring for Jesus himself.