

THE OTHER AMERICA
Sermon by David J. Robb
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
May 27, 2018

Reading: Luke 16: 19-26

If you were around in 1962, you will undoubtedly remember two significant books that appeared that year that would prove to have a profound effect on our nation's moral imagination and political agenda from that time to the present. The first book was Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* that issued a clear and emotional wake-up call to the slow ecological disaster we were unwittingly unleashing on our environment by the unregulated use of toxic pesticides. Many believe that Carson's book was the trigger that first alerted millions of people to think seriously for the first time about the environmental crisis and helped to launch the movement to reverse decades of neglect of our fragile ecosystem—our soil, our water, our air.

The second book that appeared in 1962 that was to have a profound effect on America's social and political future was Michael Harrington's moving account of what he called "the invisible poor" in America in his landmark study, *The Other America*. Using figures from the most recent census, he claimed that at least a quarter of American citizens go to bed hungry every night, have inadequate shelter and medical care, and do not have access to jobs or appropriate sources of income. He stated that the principal assumption of his treatise was "an ethical proposition" that could be stated succinctly, "In a nation with a technology capable of providing every citizen with a decent life, it is an outrage and a scandal that there should be such social misery."

Like Carson's *Silent Spring*, Harrington's book also touched a sensitive nerve in this country. It was widely read and discussed. Among those whose attentions it clearly arrested were those of then President John F. Kennedy, his brother Robert, the Attorney General, and Vice President (later to be President) Lyndon Johnson. All three would be instrumental in helping to promote and shape what Johnson himself would later call the "war on poverty." I mention that to remind us that once upon a time, some of our political leaders actually read books and were quite adept at shaping public policy to moral persuasion. There have been times in our nation's history when our leaders would stake their influence behind policies on behalf of all the people, not just the rich and powerful.

Religion too used to have more to say about a range of moral issues of human importance. After all, both the Old and New Testaments have a great deal to say about money and poverty, about war, about forgiveness, about hospitality, about the treatment of the stranger and the alien. They do not really have much to say about homosexuality or birth control or abortion, or same sex marriage. Yet those have become the dominant themes in recent years of the religious right.

Out of those early efforts emerged a comprehensive approach to address the multiple and interrelated by-products of poverty. And certainly we can point to several positive outcomes of this concerted effort over the course of the second half of the 20th century – early childhood education and the founding of Head Start. Medicare, Medicaid, numerous initiatives to create employment opportunities and a living wage, and various safety-net provisions, including food stamps. All of these initiatives are currently under attack and in danger of being dismantled.

I have been thinking a lot about these issues in recent weeks when we have been commemorating the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Dr. King was slain in early April of 1968 in Memphis while there to support the efforts of public sanitation workers to secure appropriate pay and benefits. But he was, at that same time, deeply engaged with the staff of the organization he had formed some years earlier, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, to create a massive demonstration in Washington D.C. to be launched later that month. It soon became known as "The Poor People's Campaign." Its purpose was to give visual and public witness to the plight of the poor in this country, and to advocate a specific legislative agenda to

address the issues of poverty. I was at that time a member of the staff of the Council of Churches of Washington D.C., and working full time on this campaign. I was asked to coordinate the supportive efforts of the interfaith religious community of Washington with the staff of SCLC in order to develop local strategic, logistical and moral support for the campaign.

Previously, Dr. King and SCLC had focused primarily on the issues of racial discrimination and racial justice. But in 1968, King's focus was significantly larger than anything SCLC had addressed before. This campaign would be about economic justice for all, regardless of race, and was intended to reinvigorate the stalled government initiatives on behalf of the "war on poverty" that had run up against a wall of conservative opposition. Certainly, Dr. King and his supporters all understood that this issue far transcended the boundaries of racial discrimination alone. Consequently, they developed an ambitious plan to bring poor people of all ethnic identities and representing a variety of communities from across the nation to Washington. The plan called for some 3,000 demonstrators who would establish a campsite on the National Mall for about three months. The model that served as the inspiration for this gathering was the famous "bonus march" on Washington at the height of the Great Depression in 1932. This camp site would then serve as a very visible and inescapable witness to the persistent "social misery" endured by the poor of this country. It would also be a staging area from which poor people could advocate on their own behalf with congressional representatives and other government agencies.

And so it was that a few weeks following the assassination of Dr. King, representatives of many poverty-stricken communities in the United States began to make their way across the country to Washington D.C. and to take up residence in the campsite of plywood and plastic A-frame huts that was being constructed on the mall. The campsite would be known as "Resurrection City." There were unemployed Latino farm workers from the southwest, urban poor from the inner cities of Detroit and Chicago, Native Americans from the Pacific northwest, black and white sharecroppers without access to land from the deep south, and unemployed coal miners from Appalachia. They came by bus, by train – one contingent even came by mule train from Marks, Mississippi, the poorest community in the poorest county of the poorest state of the Union.

Resurrection City was derisively dismissed at that time by members of Congress, unmoved by its stated mission, as "Insurrection City." In the course of its brief lifespan of only six weeks, it was wedged between two of the signal tragedies of the 20th century: April 4, 1968, the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. and June 6, 1968, the assassination of Robert Kennedy following his dramatic victory in the California Democratic primary. Coincidentally, I had been working as a volunteer in D.C. in support of Kennedy's nomination, and my wife was pregnant with our first son, Matthew, who would be born two weeks after the Kennedy assassination. When Robert Kennedy's funeral cortege wound its way through Washington, D.C. it stopped at Resurrection City, for which he had been a strong supporter. I remember how moving it was when the residents all knelt and sang "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

On the last day of March in 1968 – March 31st, and four days before his death in Memphis—Dr. King had been invited to preach at the Washington Cathedral. He used the occasion to prepare Washingtonians for the Poor People's Campaign that was to be launched on April 22. I was there that morning, and I remember that his sermon was dedicated to helping those gathered to understand the rationale and purposes of the campaign. I recall that a principal text on which he based his remarks that day was this parable of Jesus from Luke's Gospel that I read earlier in the service. I do not of course remember much of what he said, but I can make an educated guess and invite you to reflect for a few minutes with me about this text and its possible significance.

On first glance, this parable seems quite simple and quite transparent. There are only two characters, one designated only as "a rich man," and the other, "a poor man named Lazarus." There are also only two brief scenes. The first scene is presumably repeated endlessly and never really changes: It describes the two characters and their relative status. The story takes great pains to describe in specific detail the physical condition and circumstances of each of the two principal characters. The rich man is described simply in this way: "He was dressed in purple and fine linen," details that would have signaled to the original hearers that he was very wealthy

indeed, and that he felt quite at ease with his circumstances and with letting others know of it. The second detail is brief and equally important: “He feasted sumptuously every day.”

The second character, the poor man, Lazarus, is said to sit each day at the gate of the first man’s mansion. He is presented as extremely hungry, physically suffering, with sores on his legs, and too weak to protect himself from being licked by the stray dogs in the street. His sole source of nourishment is the bread that the rich man commonly uses to wipe his hands at meal time and discards.

At this point, the story abruptly shifts to the second scene. Now both men have died and their roles have radically reversed. The rich man, far from living the privileged life he has grown accustomed to, now finds himself suddenly in Hades where he is being punished and tormented by fire. He lifts his eyes and catches a glimpse of Lazarus, the very man who used to beg outside of his home in his previous life. Lazarus is being cared for and comforted by Father Abraham. The rich man asks for mercy from Abraham and to asks him to send Lazarus to him with a drop of water to cool his tongue “for I am in agony in these flames.” But Abraham rejects the offer and says to the rich man, “Child, remember that during your life-time you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here with me, and you are in agony.” And “Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to here.”

Deceptively simple, this is not really an easy story to interpret. I shall confine myself to just a couple of observations. First, I think we miss the point if we focus our attention exclusively on the outcome for each of these characters in the second scene. The parable is aimed at basic truths regarding our life here and now. It is not advancing a theology of the afterlife; it is not a travel guide to the next world. Its symbols are just that, namely symbols, not literal fact. The great reversal of fortune in the afterlife for each man is not the result of a decree by a righteous judge for either obvious malfeasance or reward for personal rectitude. Rather we are presented in the second scene with visual images of the consequences that follow from how each man chose (or was forced) to live his life on earth.

What is more important to the message of this parable is that the rich man has grown oblivious to the manifest suffering of the person who sits at his own gate day after day. What Jesus seems most focused on in this story is the over-absorption with self and privilege that can render any one of us blind to the suffering that is right before us. A friend of mine used to say, “There is no smaller package in the world than someone who is all wrapped up in himself.” And that in a nutshell seems to sum up the condition that Jesus portrays succinctly in his portrait of the rich man in this parable. Being rich was not his crime. Being rich was his opportunity, but he was all wrapped up in himself.

The Poor People’s Campaign initiated 50 years ago by Dr Martin Luther King Jr. was developed in part, I believe, to address this very issue in the American psyche. It was the same issue that Michael Harrington had lifted up in *The Other America*. It was not just that America’s poor had been neglected and forgotten, as most reformers pointed out. It was that the poor had become virtually invisible in mid-century America. The French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre once claimed that the ultimate evil is the ability to make abstract that which is terribly concrete. In the midst of creating unprecedented affluence, America had managed to reduce poverty itself to an abstraction that rendered it largely hidden from view

And a second major theme contained in this parable is this: When Jesus famously states later in the Gospel of Luke, “It is more difficult for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter into the Kingdom of God,” he is not, I believe, issuing an automatic judgment that wealth, per se, is evil. But wealth, like any form of self-indulgence that diffuses our spiritual attention, can certainly be dangerous. Kurt Vonnegut told a story not long ago about his close friend and fellow novelist Joseph Heller. Both were attending a party in Heller’s honor hosted by an enormously wealthy hedge fund owner at his home in the Hamptons. Vonnegut called

his friend aside and inquired, "Joe, does it bother you that our host probably made more money today than you have made in your entire career as a writer?" "No, not really," Heller replied. "Why not?" pressed his friend. "Because I have something this man will never have," said Heller. "And what is that?" asked his friend. Heller replied simply, "Enough."

Finally, I share an insight I learned from William Sloan Coffin who was the college chaplain during my undergraduate years. He made an observation during a sermon at which I was present that I have never forgotten. "It is one thing," he said, "to graduate from college and know that there are rich people and there are poor people. It is an entirely different matter to graduate from college and have come to understand that there are rich people *because* there are poor people." That, finally is one of the messages I believe may lie hidden in this odd parable that Jesus told. It is also a message that Michael Harrington was trying to convey in *The Other America*. And it is certainly the message Dr. King was committed to embody and reveal in his final protest, the Poor People's Campaign. Whether we have wealth or do not, we still belong to the same family. And when we become oblivious to that, it is at that point we begin to lose touch with a primary aspect of our own humanity.

I do not need to remind anyone here today that these hard-won efforts by thousands of deeply caring people in response to the challenges of poverty over the course of the past 50 years are at present under attack and in danger of being discarded. That is why the Rev. William Barber and the Kairos Center at Union Theological Seminary here in New York has initiated a new Poor People's Campaign to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, and to honor his life and moral vision. William Barber is the pastor of the Greenleaf Christian Church in Goldsboro, North Carolina, and is widely known as the organizer of the weekly protests at the state capital in Raleigh, North Carolina known as "Moral Mondays." On May 13, the day after Mother's Day, Dr, Barber and the Kairos Center launched "The Poor People's Campaign, 2018: A National Call for Moral Renewal," and it is expected to continue through June 23. This new initiative has the enthusiastic support of a wide interfaith coalition of the religious communities in America, including the endorsement and active support of the Association of Unitarian-Universalist Congregations. The principal difference between Dr. King's campaign and the current project is that the main organizing efforts are currently focused on the state legislatures of over 40 states rather than primarily at the federal government level.

The stated goals for the campaign include the following:

- A basic end to voter-suppression laws and protection of the right to vote in each state
- Federal and state laws to insure living wages for all who work
- An end to mass incarceration policies
- Equity in education
- A single-payer health care insurance system guaranteed for all

It is important that this effort receive as wide a following and support as possible. For more information about its activities, please consult the website created especially for The Poor People's Campaign, 2018