

Sermon: Justice for the Poor

Yesterday our Presbytery announced that they had become the first Sanctuary Presbytery in the Nation. This means concretely that walk with people who have been detained by ICE and their families. Our church is officially a Sanctuary church. Many might feel that the current debate around the border, refugees and immigrants is really a political issue that should not be made into a religious one. I believe that these are religious issues of the human heart, they are religious issues at the heart of our Lord which have been hijacked to become political issues. A man at my last church showed me an article in the Wall Street Journal that was alarmed about a Group of Catholic, Evangelical and Mainline Protestant leaders getting together to speak against the cruel injustices that the poor and marginalized often face. The Journal presented the argument that religious leaders have no authority in these political matters. The man who brought it in was a good Christian man who volunteered regularly in our by-weekly food give a way program. However he was favorable to the article, and asked me what did I think? I said, "You are absolutely right as a Presbyterian Pastor I given no personal authority. In our system authority is found in scripture, and it if speaks to these issues, as it does, we must speak, as indeed our church, or Presbytery and our denominate has. And indeed the law, the prophets, the psalms, proverbs historical books, gospels, Paul's letters and James all speak of these issues. As Abraham says at the end of this parable they have Moses and the prophets, if they will not listen to them they will not be convinced even if someone is raised from the dead. The parable in stark terms speaks of the importance of listening to this overwhelming scriptural message. This parable is particularly striking because it is the only parable of Jesus in which the characters are named. Abraham is named, perhaps not surprising. However the destitute man Lazarus is mentioned. There is one character who has no name is the rich man Although He has no name we know a lot about him. He was rich, powerful and influential. He wrapped himself in expensive purple (denotes regal status) and fine Egyptian Linen every single day. No relaxed dress code on casual Fridays. But the man was relaxed and confident. He partied every day, not just weekends and festival days, his banquet settings were dazzling. He even had five living brothers surely a sign of God's blessing. All of this is in contrast to Lazarus. Who had no one, since he was literally cast at the rich man's gate, which was the word for a city temple gate, it was a beautiful gate, and one that barred Lazarus from the food he lusted after while lying at the gate with sores, and being licked by Dogs For Lazarus it was as vast as the pearly gates. This scene is repeated day after day, after day almost endlessly. In every parable there is a twist and this one is one of the most dramatic in any parable. The poor man died and was carried off by angels. Later the rich man, having the longer life span died and was unlike Lazarus, buried. The rich man opens up his eyes and is transfixed, stunned and surprised by what he sees, he is in Hell, while Lazarus is in the bosom of Abraham. This reflects some of Luke's dark Karma, In Acts Herod gives a speech and when people say he is a God and he is eaten up by worms. Annais and Saphira lie about their pledge and God strikes them dead. Earlier in Luke's gospel God visits the rich farmer who builds more barns him and says tonight your soul will be demanded of you. However the rich man understands none of that. He commands Abraham, to command Lazarus to get him some water because he is torment. It really is all about him. Then a sharp and haunting statement, Abraham says, "Remember that you received good in your life and Lazarus bad". The rich guy

was aware that Lazarus was there, and remembers but he just did not care. Then Abraham says, there is a great chasm between you and us. So just like the poor man who could never pass by the gate on earth, the pearly gates were shut to the rich man. The rich man is desperate, he wants his family to know about this. Abraham said they have Moses and the Prophets. In other words if you do not have a heart for the poor you have not read, or at least you have not understood Jewish Scripture. Jesus treasures and expands that Jewish tradition in his teachings. So what does this mean? Well it does not mean that wealth or being rich is bad. Abraham was extremely wealthy on this earth, and he is heaven. However it lays huge responsibilities upon those with resources, as Jesus said in another place, For He who has been given much shall be required. This parable shows that the poor do not have the resources to help themselves, but those who do, should employ them. One of my seminary professors stated this about building bridges between rich and poor, that the people who can afford the bricks are the ones who are the ones who are responsible to build the bridges. When I think of the gate that the poor man could not cross, and the pearly gates that the Rich man could not transverse, terrifyingly it makes me consider the current immigrant and refugee crisis. People have asked me do I want open borders. I have to ask, in the US or in the Kingdom of God? I certainly want Pearly gates to be open to me, and to you and to everyone else in our country and if that means I need to think about opening the gates to the poor the needy and the refugee, that should be done. For when we do that we are literally opening the gates to our Lord who was crucified outside the gates. In Matthew's gospel it says that if you feed the poor, clothe the naked and visit those in prison who have done it to Christ. It is Christ who lives among the refugees, it is Christ who lies at the gate, it is Christ who asks us in this time of unspeakable cruelty to speak up, and I am honored to be a member of a church, a Presbytery and a denomination that has spoken and continues to do so. Luke's gospel and Acts share the constant theme of world without boundaries, barriers or borders. A world where all are children of Abraham. Down deep we all want a theology of love that echoes Leviticus when it says, "The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God." That is the God I want to spend eternity with who lets me strangers like us pass through the pearly gates and over the borders into heaven that Jesus has graciously opened for all of us.