

Sermon "Listening" Revelation 3:14-22 Luke 16:19-31 October 4, 2015 World Comm.

Here we are, part of Christ's church here in Winsted. Part of Christ's church in the world. Are we listening? Did we hear the messages of the two scriptures read today? Are we listening?

In the gospel lesson, which is a story told by Jesus, the rich man had never really noticed the poor man, who was named Lazarus, while he, the rich man, was alive. The rich man had stepped right past the begging poor man, never showing compassion, never caring about him, barely seeing him.

A rich man... In Jesus' day, it was commonly thought that if a person was wealthy, it had to mean that God was pleased with that person. So a rich man would have been a "shoo-in" to get into heaven. Or so they thought.

But Jesus told a story that turned this way of thinking totally upside down! The rich man, dressed in purple and linen (as a wealthy priest of Jesus' day would have dressed!), ended up not in heaven, but in a place of torment, in Hell.

Part of the formerly-rich man's torment was that he could see the poor man who had for years begged unsuccessfully right at the end of his driveway now up in heaven, enjoying all sorts of heavenly comforts. The formerly-rich man - even though he was in hell - still had a "rich-man" attitude, so he called to Father Abraham, who would have been the ancestor of whom he was most proud, and told him to send the poor man (named Lazarus) down to him to help him. (He still seemed to think that others should be his servants, so his time in hell had not done him much good!)

After the rich man learned that he had been sent to hell because he had ignored the sufferings of the poor man just beyond his door, he thought of his brothers, who were still alive on earth, and asked if he could go back - just briefly - to warn them about how things would be if they didn't start living *their* lives differently. The rich man assumed - like so many of us do - that if some really dramatic, astonishing sign or occurrence could happen, then maybe people could be moved to make changes. God's answer to the rich man: Prophets have been sent. If your brothers don't heed the ones I have already sent to give them warnings, nothing will make them change..

For the past several weeks most of us have repeatedly seen on television images of multitudes of people struggling through fences and across borders and walking down railroad tracks, crying to the world for help. A lot of our brothers and sisters who call themselves Christians view these refugees as a terrible threat, for they are afraid that among the families and individuals running for their lives there may be terrorists trying to infiltrate the receiving countries. After all, some of those refugees are Muslim. (Syrians are about 87% Muslim, 10% Christian, and about 3% Jewish).

In light of much of Jesus' teaching and especially today's reading, it would seem that Christians should seriously consider our response to the refugee crisis, to the needs throughout the world and to those needs very close to home. What we do with what we have matters to God. And how we

walk through our days matters to God! And what we do as a church matters to God. What we do during our time on earth, according to Jesus' story and teachings (see Matthew 25), is our way of choosing the kind of "forever life" we will be given.

It's too easy to meander through our lives, getting a little involved in our religion ("I always feel better after I've been in church," so many have told me over the years, and each time, while I am glad, I wonder if I have been faithful to Jesus' entire message). I had a physician friend a few years ago who said he went to church once a month and gave the church \$10/week and did something special for the poor for Christmas. In his words, "It's not that I really get into God; I'm happy with my life and don't want any complications from God, and I don't get involved with church committees or church politics. But it makes me comfortable to think that I can help my little church a bit and, you know, it's sort of like buying insurance. No big deal."

Which brings us to the message to the Christians in the church of Laodicea that we heard from the Book of Revelation. The message of Christ: You are not hot OR cold in your works as my people. You are lukewarm! You think you've got everything you need; you don't realize how poor and wretched you really are. You need to buy from me gold refined by fire so that I can give you the salve to help you see. (Laodicea prided itself on having a healing industry of sorts, so this eye salve was aimed right at them.) You need to LISTEN! I am standing at your door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in and eat with you, and you with me, and you will have true blessing. (Loosely paraphrased by fte)

We hear all sorts of things every day from all sorts of noisy sources. We may thrive on the throbbing of the news reports, telling of disasters "over there." Another school shooting, another huge bombing mistake, another storm, another corrupt company caught, another politician makes a big goof, somebody else gets caught. Wrecks here, refugees there, all are in their places, neatly formatted for television, giving us distance even as they entertain us with their hurt and horror.

Let this be a warning. God's view of life and people is WAY larger than ours! And God has told us plainly, through Moses, through the prophets, and through Jesus, that God is concerned for anybody who is powerless or outcast in life. God wants God's people to live well by helping those who are poor, rejected by others, or suffering. The mandate could not be clearer. It is our choice – just as it was that rich man's choice and his brothers' choice – whether to *hear* it or not, and then whether or not to let it make a difference in the way we go through life.

The Christian path is not an easy one. It can be really hard to help others. People will take advantage of efforts to help and they often seem unappreciative and undeserving. But so are we all, in our own ways, undeserving and unappreciative of what God has done for us. Our challenge is to be obedient to what Jesus has told us God wants us to do. Jesus has showed us what is important to God: that we notice and try to use what we have been given to help those who are having trouble making it through life.

Jesus is knocking, asking us to listen to him and let him dwell in us so that we can learn how to really live. It's our choice; it's God's offer. May our choices lead us to become blessings for others and for God. Amen.