ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN

Yesterday was a great day in America. Yesterday morning in our nation’s Capital, a new chapter of American history was written, and none too soon, given the racial tensions in Charlotte, North Carolina and other American cities. Near the Washington Monument on the Capital Mall the opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture took place. The official Smithsonian Museum website describes it as a place where all Americans can learn about the richness and diversity of the African American experience, what it means to their lives and how it helped us shape this nation. A place that transcends the boundaries of race and culture that divide us, and becomes a lens into a story that unites us all. Last week I was in Washington and I saw the new museum from a distance. I look forward to a time when I can visit it personally. One of the tag lines on the news yesterday morning said: “Museum offers a clear-eyed look at history which can make us uncomfortable.” Given the scripture readings we just heard, that discomfort seems somehow appropriate.

Recently in the news there was a lot of press about a report revealing the role of Jesuits in Maryland in owning and selling slaves in the 18th and 19th centuries. Georgetown University, founded by the Jesuits in 1789, depended in its early years on revenue from Jesuit plantations that operated with slave labor. In light of this revelation a recent statement from the Jesuits said: We are disheartened by this history of moral blindness in the men and institutions we would otherwise hope to admire. The Society of Jesus wants to acknowledge and understand more deeply the sins and failures of our past. Knowing our own contributions to racial injustice in our country inspires us to work all the more for racial and ethnic reconciliation. Even men of the cloth, men as highly educated as Jesuits, could not, at that time, see the moral offense of slavery clearly for what it was. Most of our founding fathers, freedom-loving men who came to this country to escape tyranny, were slave owners. The very land, our national mall, on which the museum is built, was once a site where black lives were bought and sold, traded like cattle and livestock.

The experience of seeing the many artifacts in the museum, while making the visitor uncomfortable, like the iron shackles that bound a slave’s feet and legs -- adult-sized and a smaller one for a child -- is perhaps the only way to enter into the experience of the 10.7 million African slaves who survived the dreaded “Middle Passage.” Not all of those slaves were brought to North America, but enough to make slave-trading a lucrative enterprise for landowners who needed large labor forces on their plantations and farms. The first public American document to protest slavery wasn’t discovered until 1844; it was written by four German Quakers in 1688, but ignored, archived and forgotten for 150 years.
Perhaps this little background information about the prevalence of slavery for so many centuries, even in our own country among supposedly religious and intelligent people, can afford us some sympathy for the rich man in today’s gospel, as we observe the turmoil and anxiety in which he left this world. Remember, this parable is exactly that: a parable; it’s not live video footage of what happens to us after we die. It’s a clever and engaging story, meant to uncover our own moral blindness. Jesus told parables to create in the hearer’s imagination a word-picture, but one that would throw the listener off balance, and hit him or her upside the head with a strong left hook. And what is the hook in Jesus’ little tale? Exactly how is Jesus confronting us in this cartoon?

Notice that we’re not told anything about the religious faith of either the poor beggar named Lazarus or the anonymous rich man. We can’t say: “That one is bad; the other is good. The bad guy got what he deserved.” We don’t know anything about their moral state. Yet, when each man dies, Lazarus has a fast pass into heaven, even as the rich man goes straight to Hades and its fiery torments. What’s more, in this parable’s imaginative conversation between Abraham and the rich man, once again there isn’t a whisper that Lazarus is getting his heavenly reward by virtue of the fact that he has always been a devout worshiper of God and went to church every Sabbath. Instead, Abraham says that this reversal is just how it goes: “He who received nothing on earth gets everything in the great hereafter, even as those who had it all on earth lose it all on the other side of the grave.” (Not a proposition I’d like to entertain, especially since I have a lot of stuff.)

In his wonderful role as master storyteller, Jesus is being intentionally extreme. Once these two are in their places of reward and punishment, notice that the rich man knows Lazarus’ name, as he pleads for himself and his brothers: “Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue....Send Lazarus to my brothers’ house to warn them.” So he deliberately chose to ignore the man lying at his gate, even though he knew who Lazarus was. The rich man, who at first appeared to be guilty of no more than a sin of omission, a passive failure to address a situation he maybe didn’t even know about in the first place, turns out to have been aware of this man, even to the point of knowing his name. He’s not so innocent after all. In fact, he’s probably like most of us. We know very well the unjust conditions in our society and in our world. Each day I get the emails soliciting my support to do something about the environment, to save the polar bears from extinction, to write the governor about an inmate on death row who is there under faulty evidence.

Every day’s mail has another donation request from “Bread for the World,” Catholic Charities and “Food for the Poor.” The issues are just too overwhelming, the poverty too widespread to be able to do anything about it -- or perhaps we try to convince ourselves of that. This, however, doesn’t let us off the hook. The parable's teaching is clear: Hardness of heart in the face of relievable human misery utterly and completely separates us from God and from the kingdom of heaven. At a
canonization ceremony Pope Francis once asked: *How much damage does the comfortable life, a life of comfort, do? The gentrification of the heart paralyzes us.*

Lazarus is in heaven not because of some wonderful deeds he has done, but simply because the mercy of God reaches out to the poor and needy. That’s reflected in what the Church has come to call “the preferential option for the poor.” They are God’s favored ones and should be ours as well. The rich man is in torment in hell not because of some great evil he committed, but because of his complacency. As the prophet Amos aptly described, he was lying on his bed of ivory, eating his grain-fed beef, and sipping a nice 2010 Silver Oak Cabernet, while the world around him was falling apart.

When we pray the Lord’s Prayer we petition that God’s kingdom will come, God’s will be done “on earth as it is in heaven.” We don’t have the luxury of waiting until heaven for the hungry to be fed and the naked clothed and the homeless sheltered. “On earth – here and now – as it will be in heaven.” Heaven is nowhere if it doesn’t begin here -- in your striving for justice, in your many charitable efforts, in our building a better world.

May the Word of God as given through Amos the Prophet and Jesus the great Storyteller make us uncomfortable enough that we ask God to clear our vision enough to see Lazarus at our gate and to do whatever we can to set him free.

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