

Proper 21 C 2019

Amos 6:1a, 4-7

Psalm 146

1 Timothy 6:6-19

Luke 16:19-31

Whether you came to faith
As an adult,
And the stories and images of our tradition
Are all new,
Or known to you mostly from art and music and literature
Outside the canon of scripture,
Or whether you were brought up in the church,
And words and tunes evoke a host of memories,
By whatever path you came to this place,
Try to imagine, for a moment,
What our formation as Christians would be like
Without these hymn texts:

*Once in royal David's city
Stood a lowly cattle shed,
Where a mother laid her baby
With a manger for his bed.*

*I bind unto myself today
The strong name of the Trinity,
By invocation of the same,
The three in one
And one in three.*

*There is a green hill far away
Without a city wall...*

*All things bright and beautiful,
All creatures great and small,
All things wise and wonderful
The Lord God made them all.*

For Anglicans especially,
The Anglo-Irish Victorian hymnwriter and poet
Cecil Frances Alexander
Has shaped, perhaps more profoundly than we know,
our understanding
Of a good creation
Thriving under the watchful eye

Of a benign and powerful God.

A world of gift,
A world of love.
A good and ordered world.

Perhaps too ordered.
Perhaps, too,
Good for us and not so good for others.

And is that part of the divine plan?

Cecil Frances Alexander,
Inspired hymnwriter,
Bishop's wife,
Herald of a secure and stable world,
would have said yes.

In the hymn we love,
When we sing of all things bright and beautiful,
Each little flower that opens,
Each little bird that sings,
The hymnwriter then wrote,
With full confidence,

*The rich man in his castle,
The poor man at his gate,
God made them, high or lowly,
And ordered their estate.*

This complete misunderstanding
Of the story of the rich man and Lazarus,
A misunderstanding of the gospel itself,
Is no longer included in our hymnal.

But this expurgated verse invites us to wonder,
How many different ways
Can we fail to understand the essence of the gospel,
The witness of the prophets,
The mystery of a parable?

Because all of us do this.
All of us,
At least once in a while,
Ask the gospel,
And the Jesus who brings –

Who is – the good news of the gospel,
To comfort us when we are already comfortable,
To affirm us who already receive so much affirmation.

We ask the prophets to call out the faults of others.
We find ourselves in the Bible stories
Of fulfillment and vindication.

And it's possible that we,
Like the lovely Victorian lady
Who gave us so many precious hymns,
See in this gospel parable
An argument in favor of charity.

That we, like generations before us,
Believe that this parable shows us
That if we would just notice
The beggar on our doorstep,
And offer the crumbs from our table,
All would be well.

But Jesus comes to bring and to be
A message more radical than charity,
More radical than generous giving.
Compassion that removes barriers to human freedom
and justice that dismantles systems
of exclusion and constraint
Are at the heart of his message.

Far from affirming an orderly system
In which one man sits at table in his castle,
And sends crumbs or even a generous basket
To the beggar at the gate,
Jesus proclaims, and enacts,
An open table where differences disappear.
The open table,
Where all places are a best place,
Where all guests are most welcome,
Is the center of his coming reign of love and justice.

This story of the rich man and Lazarus
Is one step on the journey
To the reign of love and justice,
But it can trip us up
If we're not careful.

It's easy to miss the point,
Or stop too soon.

Though it has been a favorite
Through the ages,
It's an odd story,
And some scholars will claim it's not a parable.
And others will insist
It's not the authentic voice of Jesus.
There is no question
But that it's based on an earlier Egyptian folktale,
And is not original to Jesus.

Others think it's important
Because it speaks of the afterlife,
In concrete terms.
Others say that the very last thing this parable is meant to do
Is given us an image of what happens after death.

And, of course, there are those that think
This parable gives us an entirely comfortable way
Of doing the right thing.

Of course many hearers, readers,
Storytellers and preachers through the generations
Have seen the radical promise of the story.
Martin Luther King,
Following in the footsteps of Albert Schweitzer,
Saw a fable of systematic oppression
And proclaimed Jesus
As the bridge across the unbridgeable gap.¹

One thing to me seems certain:
This gospel story points us towards the witness
That Jesus came to affirm.
Everything we need to know
About how to treat others
With compassion and justice
Is already there for us to see
And learn and do,
In the witness of Moses and the prophets.
Jesus did not teach anything contrary
To the message of liberation and covenant
Brought by Moses,
And the message of faithfulness,
Justice, and renewal

Brought by the prophets.

If we want to know what we should do,
How God would have us act,
Moses and the prophets will tell us
Everything we need to know.

Doing it is another matter, of course.
Because knowing what is right
Is not, for most of us,
Much of the time,
The real challenge.
Having the will,
And the courage,
And the strength,
To do those things,
Is where we fall short.

There is, as in the story,
An unbridgeable gap
Between us and selves we hope to be,
Our actions and the way we long to act.
That's the pain,
And the challenge,
Of being human,
Made of dust,
And made
In the image and likeness of the living God.

And yet we trust
That we will take our place at the open table,
We are confident
We will be rocked in the bosom of Abraham.
Not because we knew and did what was right.
But because Jesus, who came among us
as prophet and moral teacher
And overturner of tables
And teller of tales,
became
The bridge across the unbridgeable gap.

Without Jesus,
We would all be looking from afar,
calling for help to come across the great divide.
In bridging the chasm,
He sets us free and brings us home.

So what will we do,
Since we are free?
There is no need to fear the flames;
We are never trapped.
We may have to turn around,
May have to change,
May have to let go
Of many things to which we cling.
But there is a way beyond,
Beyond the failures and the falling short,
Beyond the best attempts and good faith efforts
Of here and now.

What will we do,
Since we are free?
Free to live into the promise,
Free to share the hope,
Free for compassion,
Free for justice?

What does that look like,
In these troubled times?
What does it look like in your own life?
In our life together in community?
In our nation,
In the midst of crisis?
On our planet,
Where real flames really do threaten?

Since we are free,
How do we proclaim and enact
The open table,
Where all have a best place
And everyone is most welcome?

Since we are free,
How do we live into the promise of the prophets,
That exiles will return,
The hungry will be satisfied,
The face of the earth will be renewed?

It is our task,
Our privilege,
To discover a way.
To listen, to seek,

To discover.

Some parables point towards the promise.
Some parables show the fulfillment.
This story is only a place to begin.

Like every story of Jesus,
It's a gift.

Let's take it, shake it,
Open it up,
Take the gift, the mystery and the goodness,
Put it to use,
And move on,
Into the promised future.

ⁱ <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/impassable-gulf-parable-dives-and-lazarus-sermon-dexter-avenue-baptist-church>