

Sermon – Proper 21 – Cathedral of the Incarnation

September 25, 2016 – Luke 16:19-31

Over the past six or so month I've been undertaking somewhat of an experiment in my life. During Lent I decided to take a break from Facebook.. I'd become a bit fed up with Facebook and the demands it seemed to be placing on my time. Now as a portal of social media I, in theory, had full control over it, but it seemed to me to be the other way around. I found myself spending more and more of my time reading the news feed and trying to make considered responses to friends postings. I use the term friend loosely as many of the 'friends' that I had were not known to me personally but were friends of friends of friends. Sort of like the cousin three times removed.

I also started to notice changes in Facebook as the ads and news feeds seemed to be tailored for me. Of course this was Facebook's aim. They employ thousands of technicians to tinker with the algorithms so that I was fed news and ads that related to postings that they were scanning for key words. I felt like I was being pulled down the rabbit hole and for someone that doesn't like to be controlled I decided to take a break.

Lent came and went and decided to continue my Facebook vacation. As time ticked by though I came to realize that I was missing out on many of my real friends life events. I missed congratulating friends on their engagement, on getting a new job, on becoming pregnant. I started to have separation anxiety but continued my Facebook holiday to see how my emotions and reactions would pay out.

Most of my friends are either from Australia or from seminary so they are scattered across the US and the world. Social media had become the way we kept in contact. My niece in London told me that Facebook was passé and she was only know using Instagram and Snap chat. My sister, never a Facebook user, was following suite. So no I had to become an Instagram user. Then a close friend from seminary only wanted to communicate via Facebook messenger. Facebook separated messenger into it's own app, so I had another medium to use. And then there is Twitter. We are in our first election where Twitter is the medium of choice for acerbic comments. On and on it goes with a new app every few months that seeks to be the next big thing.

Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, What's App, Twitter and the seemingly endless iterations of social media apps have altered the way the world communicates. Pictures of events and commentary are now shared around the world within seconds. Social media is also changing the way the church communicates. There are of course benefits and concerns around social media for all of us and not all of this new technology is bad for us. In the wake of Superstorm Sandy I witnessed how Facebook was used to grow and manage the Occupy Sandy relief effort in Brooklyn. It was truly awesome to see how the technology became the infrastructure that matched people's needs with goods and services far faster than FEMA could ever respond.

The use of social media in our lives allows us to take in more images from events and places in the world than at any other time in history. Iconic images that come to symbolize events flash around the globe in minutes. Who can forget the image of Alan Kurdi, the 3 year old Syrian refugee who drowned as he and his family tried to reach Greece, or the image of Omran Daqneesh, the 5 year old Syrian boy who had been pulled from his bombed out home

in Aleppo, Syria. These two images represented everything of the pain and suffering of Syrian refugees as they endure a war that has claimed 500,000 lives with not end in sight. These images distill large scale human suffering into a single frame that carries with it the power to change hearts and minds.

The images seem to generate a response in us and a flurry of postings but they are soon supplanted by new images of something entirely different and we move on. Social media has made the filtering of news a science and this can lead us to ignoring suffering and other problems in the world. We can become despairing and cynical after being saturated with images and news about the suffering in the world, which tempts us to close our eyes and our hearts because we shutdown our overloaded sympathies.

When we do become immune to the images of a world and our communities suffering we risk becoming like the rich man in today's gospel parable. The prophet Amos sets the scene for us when he paints a picture of a complacent people lulling about on ivory benches seemingly without a care in the world. These people seem inattentive to the world outside their homes, all the time not aware of the threat of invasion that would eventually claim their lives and send them into exile first.

The nameless rich man in the parable is so consumed with his life that he doesn't even notice Lazarus at his door suffering from hunger and illness. We could imagine him on his ivory couch reading the scrolls of first century social media that might stir his heart but that doesn't open his eyes to what is obvious at his gate. We too might act this way as we get caught up in the day to day activities of our households but fail to see the obvious signs of suffering in our communities. The suffering in our world are reduced to the scenery of our lives and to images that might fill our news feeds. The rich are all of us that fail to see and engage with the suffering that is all around us.

The parable seeks to balance the scales of justice. Jesus names the suffering one but the rich man remains nameless. Lazarus is lifted in death by angels but the rich man dies and is just buried. It is only in death that the rich man starts to see what has happened. Death has focused his heart and mind but alas it is too late. He cries for mercy but is reminded that he has already experienced the good things in life but Lazarus hasn't and so now enjoys his time. When the man wants Abraham to warn his family so that they might not make the same mistakes in their life. Abraham reminds him that they have Moses and the prophets, they already have what they need to see the errors of their ways but they choose not to pay heed to the prophet's message of justice for all. We also have what we need in the words of Jesus, Moses and the prophets if only we pay attention.

How easy it is for us to stop listening and to stop seeing the real pain and suffering of the world. How easy it is to ignore the plight of the marginalized and to even ignore each other. We need to be trained and constantly reminded to truly look deeply in our world so as to really see each other and to respond. We can come and go from this place without really knowing what is happening in each of our lives, what things we might offer prayer for or a helping hand.

The parable today is a reminder of our need to be aware to our own blindness of heart and of sight that prevents us from connecting with each other. Connecting with our neighbor is the invitation of Jesus. We seek to lift the veil from our hearts and overcome the filters that grow up around us through social media and other distractions.

Next month we have invited you to join in small groups to explore together what it means to be call by Jesus in this community. These groups will be a time to come together and to really get to know the other participants by sharing stories and reflections on scripture. You will have an opportunity to see each other and grow together as the body of Christ. If we can see each other in the fullest sense then we might find our own Lazarus and the true reward of getting to know someone anew.

Amen