

Mother Lynn Finnegan
 Church of the Holy Faith
 Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost
 Proper 21
 Amos 6:1a, 4-7; Ps 146;
 1 Tim 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31
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God's Agents in a Suffering World

In 1972, bioethics professor Peter Singer published a work that famously became known as the “drowning child thought experiment.” The scenario posed by Singer, which, had it been proposed during Jesus’ time, would have been called a parable, goes like this:

“On your way to work, you pass a small pond. Children sometimes play in the pond, which is only about knee-deep. The weather’s cool, though, and it’s early, so you are surprised to see a lone child splashing about in the pond. As you get closer, you see that it is a very young child, just a toddler, who is flailing about, unable to stay upright or walk out of the pond. You look for the parents or babysitter, but there is no one else around. The child is unable to keep her head above the water for more than a few seconds at a time. If you don’t wade in and pull her out, she seems likely to drown. Wading in is easy and safe, but you will ruin the new shoes you bought only a few days ago, and get your suit wet and muddy. By the time you hand the child over to someone responsible for her, and change your clothes, you’ll be late for work. What should you do?” Predictably, most presented with this question overwhelming respond, “save the child.” It would be inconceivably cruel to keep on walking by. Surely the life of a child is worth more than the cost of a pair of shoes and the inconvenience of getting one’s pants wet and being late for work. Singer would then go on to challenge our moral responsibility to help those in need, regardless of physical distance. The thought experiment argues that if one has the *ability* to prevent suffering, one

has an *obligation to act*, regardless of the proximity or connection to the suffering. One morally cannot walk on by, even if the suffering is half a world away. To back up his thought experiment with actions, Singer is a member of the Give What You Can society, which encourages members to donate at least 10% of their income to effective charities.

Interestingly, Singer is an atheist. While his drowning child thought experiment casts a stark light on the pervasiveness of global poverty, his philosophy isn't new. It has deep roots in Mosaic law and the prophets of the Old Testament. It has deep roots in Jesus. It is echoed in the words of St. Paul and other epistle writers. We are called to be God's agents in a suffering world. We are called to do what we can to alleviate that suffering, by whatever means and abilities we have, setting our hope and trust in God. As Moses told the Israelites in the Book of Deuteronomy: "If there is among you *anyone* in need . . . do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. . . I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.'" ¹ As Isaiah proclaimed as God's spokesperson, "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house . . . ?" ² If you have any familiarity with scripture, you know I can go on and on here. God's command for our moral, ethical, and religious commitment to the poor and those in need is found throughout the Old and the New Testament. So what is Jesus' point with this parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus? Is it just to reemphasize what his audience already knew? What we already know? Yes, and No. Yes, Jesus is confronting the Pharisees who Luke describes as "lovers

¹ Deuteronomy 15:7, 11

² Isaiah 58:6-7a

of money.” Jesus’ teachings on sacrificial love, humility, and generosity are consistent with God’s word spoken for thousands of years. This parable starkly and unambiguously condemns an attitude of indifference and apathy toward those in need. It calls into question our idolization of prosperity and the equating of wealth with virtue. In the words of Jesus’ mother Mary: “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.”³ But also No, Jesus is not simply parroting Moses and the prophets. Jesus has an additional message for the Pharisees and for us: the urgent call to pay attention. The urgent call to treat one another with dignity and respect. The urgent call to recognize the face of Christ in everyone we meet. The urgent call to repent of our exclusivity, our hostility, and our judgment of others.

In the parable, the Rich Man is a parody of excess and arrogance. He is clothed in purple, a color strictly reserved to royalty and high officials. His feasting is not the problem: after all, Jesus was known to enjoy feasts on occasion. The problem is his opulent consumption of sumptuous feasts “every day,” while Lazarus lies at his gate, ignored and deprived of even the scraps from his table. Jesus uses exaggerated contrasts to underscore the parable’s urgent warning. The lavish meals of the rich man in life contrast with his unquenchable thirst in the afterlife; the deathly poverty of Lazarus contrasts with his resting by the side, or more correctly, “in the bosom” of Abraham. Even in his agony, however, the Rich Man refuses to acknowledge Lazarus’ dignity and worth. “Send Lazarus,” he tells Abraham. Send him to comfort me, send him to warn my wealthy brothers. Lazarus is still a

³ Luke 1:52

dehumanized beggar who can be ordered about. In the parable, the Rich Man exhibits no repentance and no accountability. He is blinded by his own self-importance.

Will the siblings of the Rich Man get the message? Will we? We are those five siblings; we who are still alive have been warned about our urgent situation. What is the Good News in this? The Good News is that we have Moses and the prophets; we have scripture; we even have Christ who died for us and is risen from the dead. We are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses, living and dead. We have a God, as our Collect reminds us, who declares his almighty power chiefly in showing mercy and pity. Jesus reemphasizes and we can refocus. The parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus invites us to reexamine and reimagine our blessings, our compassion, our priorities, our gratitude, and our respect for one another. We have been given all we need. Amen.