

**Pentecost 19C + September 25, 2016**  
**Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit**  
**Luke 16:19-31**

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We call this place where sitting right now a sanctuary. What does that term mean to you?

- A sacred place.
- A haven, any place of safety.
- A refuge, protected from danger.

A church sanctuary is a place where we experience God's love and forgiveness. We hear the story of salvation read aloud and we know it to be true. We proclaim the good news of the risen Christ in our liturgy and hymns. We pray for the church, the world, and people in need.

But we must guard against getting too complacent in our sanctuaries lest they become not just havens but shields from the messiness of life. In church, we expect to find the beautiful and the true, but we also must also encounter the horrible and the miserable-- those two categories into which Woody Allen divided all of life, as perhaps you remember from Annie Hall.

For me, today, the messiness of life is laid bare in Aleppo, Syria's largest city. I can't get out of my head what has been happening there since Thursday as devastating air strikes by Syrian and Russian planes continue. Around midnight last night the chief of the United Nations stated that he was appalled by the sheer scope of the escalation of these attacks. In addition to destruction and the loss of life, this city of 2 million has been left without running water. A Unicef official told the BBC that "Aleppo is slowly dying, and the world is watching,

and the water is being cut off and bombed - it's just the latest act of inhumanity." In fact, water is being used as a weapon of war by both sides. The pumping station supplying the eastern rebel-held parts of Aleppo, affecting 200,000 people, was damaged Friday and subsequent airstrikes made repairs impossible. In retaliation for that attack, a station that pumps water to the entire western part of the city, serving 1.5 million people - was then deliberately switched off. The lack of running water is becoming "catastrophic." In the midst of this, who knows what has become of the little Omran Daqneesh that we talked about just a few weeks ago, the tousle-haired 5-year-old photographed right after he was unearthed from the rubble of his bombed house in Aleppo.

In today's Gospel reading today we meet a wealthy man who chose not to be confronted by the messiness of life. Wealth, as we encounter it in Luke's Gospel, is construed as a sign of arrogance and pride. At the end of last week's Gospel reading Jesus admonished the Pharisees that "you cannot serve both God and wealth," or "mammon," a Greek word that signifies wealth as an evil influence. So, because he is rich, we know where this man's true allegiance lies--and it isn't with God. It is the likes of this man that the prophet Amos condemns in our first reading, those who lie on beds of ivory and lounge on their couches while the world is falling into ruin around them.

The messiness of life lay at his very gate in the form of a poor beggar named Lazarus. Lazarus was covered with open sores and had to survive on whatever crumbs fall his way. We don't know how long Lazarus had lain there but it could have been years; at any rate, the rich man never took notice. Now Lazarus has died, the rich man has died, and here in Jesus'

parable we experience the consequences of the rich man's choice to ignore the reality of life, the messiness of life, outside his gate.

The action in this parable actually takes place in Hades, the afterlife—not heaven or hell, but the unseen world of the dead. Here, the wealthy man finds himself tormented by fire while Lazarus peacefully rests with Abraham and the saints. The man pleads to Abraham for mercy. But we can tell he is only thinking of himself, not what put him there, because he tries to treat Lazarus as his servant: “Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in agony in these flames.”

But Lazarus can't come, and the irony is almost delicious: Whereas in life it would have taken the rich man only one step to come to Lazarus' aid, now Lazarus cannot come to his because a great chasm has opened between them, which cannot be bridged.

Further evidence of the rich man's arrogance is that he then tries to wheedle Abraham into sending Lazarus to warn his brothers so they don't end up the way he has—again with no evidence of remorse on his part. On top of that, he won't take Abraham's “no” for an answer, but tries to argue with him!

I believe the mainline Protestant church is in trouble because we spend too much time avoiding the messiness of life. We prefer our sanctuaries to be nice, clean, orderly, and for the most part, quiet. But here is the reality: The world is full of pain. God loves the world. And God loves the world so much that he entered into it, God with us, God suffering with us, to live like us in every way, yet without sin—and to experience that ultimate messiness of life, death on a cross, and through that to do battle with the devil and to conquer death

forever, that we might know in EVERY circumstance of our earthly struggle that life, not death, has the last word.

This is why, in God's divine compassion, Christ is with always us, suffering with us – which is the true etymology of the word compassion, meaning “suffering with.” And at the same time Paul reminds us at the same time that “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.”

We don't live in Syria, but we are in the midst of a kind of war zone, that of poverty. Did you know that poverty in Rock County increased from 10 percent in 2007 to nearly 15 percent in 2015 even though Wisconsin's overall poverty rate declined? That child poverty is increasing even more rapidly here, from 15 percent in 2007 to 22 percent in 2015? Did you know that, statewide, the poverty rate for black children, 44 percent, is more than four times the rate for white children and for Hispanics more than three times that of white children? And that the poverty rate in the School District of Beloit is 74 percent? That three out of four children here in Beloit live in poverty?

If Atonement Lutheran Church is to survive, and thrive, we must open ourselves onto the suffering world around us. What resources do we have that can serve this great need? The more we come face to face with suffering humanity, the clearer we will come to see the face of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ:

“I am weak and I need Thy strength and power / To help me over my weakest hour. / Help me through the darkness Thy face to see, / Lead Me, O Lord, Lead me.”