

“Building Beloved Community”

2 Corinthians 5:17-20; Luke 16:19-31 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – September 28, 2025
Reconciliation Special Offering Observance #2

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might acknowledge our deep need for your reconciling love. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Our scriptures today are held over from last week, when we embarked on a two-part exploration of our themes for Reconciliation this year. Reconciliation Ministry, as you likely know, is our Disciples’ racial justice ministry, created in the late 1970s and re-vamped during our turn-of-the-century commitment to becoming an anti-racist church. The offerings that we share today are split 50/50 between our Region’s racial justice ministries and the general Reconciliation office. The passage we just heard from Second Corinthians is where the ministry got its name. We have been “entrusted with the message of reconciliation” it says, becoming ambassadors for Christ, for the sake of ushering in a new creation. That’s a tall order. I, for one, am really glad we’re not doing this on our own.

This year, we have combined this theme scripture with the story of the rich man and Lazarus from Luke 16. If you dared me, I bet I could preach on Luke 16 for a month or more, because the stories are so rich and complicated. But for now, perhaps two weeks is enough. Last week, we focused on the first half of the theme: “Beyond Brokenness.”; today we will get into “Building Beloved Community.”

“Beloved Community,” of course, is a phrase – a vision or dream, if you will – introduced into the American collective consciousness by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. It is his term for the new creation Paul was describing in Second Corinthians 5, where God has reconciled the world to God-self. The creators of this year’s Reconciliation Special Offering materials had the wisdom to add the word “building”. Because they knew. They know, just as we know, that even though we long to see beyond our current brokenness, the beloved community isn’t here yet; we are still working on building it.

The story we read from Luke has a very clear villain and a very clear victim, and the consequences are also very stark. Our lives are a lot messier than that, though, aren’t they? Sometimes we are victimized; sometimes we are callous and selfish and greedy. Even when it comes to the consequences, we may at first think we prefer for things to be cut and dry, but when it comes right down it, we often hedge.

As I told you last week, I am not an expert on the metaphysics of the afterlife, but that “chasm” thing Father Abraham talked about seems suspect to me. It’s interesting to me that Lazarus – the one this story seems to be lifting up as most important – has no speaking lines in this whole drama. We’re told about his suffering, his longings, and his fate, but he never gets to speak directly or say what he wants. When the rich man pleads to have Lazarus come down and wet his burning tongue, it’s Father Abraham who responds, with a double-barreled Absolutely Not.

There's part of me that wonders if Father Abraham made up that chasm, so that Lazarus wouldn't have to feel obliged to help the rich man. I mean, sure, Lazarus probably had plenty of pent-up resentment toward him, but now that he's being comforted in the bosom of Abraham, doesn't it seem like he might feel some iota of sympathy for the tormented rich man? Mightn't he want to be the bigger person, offering relief to the one who gave none? But Father Abraham doesn't want him to even consider it, so he talks about this chasm that makes it impossible. That is how the story enforces its very rigid portrait of the consequences of our choices.

But if I can imagine Lazarus being more merciful than that, I have to believe that God is more merciful than that. Surely humanity can't be more merciful than God? If we want to learn how to build beloved community, don't we probably need to learn how to wield mercy in ways that lead to more abundant life? If the consequences of Hades couldn't bring the rich man to a deep realization of his sins and a desire to repent, could that transformation possibly be catalyzed by receiving mercy from the one whom he had denied it to? That feels much more like the way God works to me. We won't know till we know, of course, so the point here isn't to wait and see how it works, but rather to act out these lessons here and now, where we are. Mercy is definitely a major ingredient required for building beloved community. Like Abraham, we may not like that, but given how messy our lives and our world actually are, there is no way around it.

The second thing this story can teach us about building beloved community is found in the literary details. Do you remember the title this story is usually given? It's called "The Rich Man and Lazarus." Do you notice what is surprising about that title? Do you notice how it turns the hierarchies of our world upside down? Who is named simply by his sin? The Rich Man. Whose name is known, and remembered, and proclaimed? Lazarus, the hungry one, the miserable one, the one who couldn't even protect himself from the neighborhood dogs. This is a major reversal of our expectations of how the world works. This is Jesus telling us what beloved community looks like, echoing his mother's words from the Magnificat, where the lowly are lifted up and the proud are dismissed in the thoughts of their hearts.

If we want to be able to build beloved community, we have to be willing to dismantle the structures that hold up the powerful and condemn the poor to lives of suffering. We have to be willing to identify where we stand in those structures. Am I a person with a name in this story, or an obstacle to someone else's abundant living? We have to be willing to let go of a little of our own individuality in order to reform the systems that have formed us. It may feel like just more brokenness, but there is a difference between being broken and being broken open. If we want to learn how to build beloved community, we have to learn the names of the hungry. Because once we learn their names, we will hopefully be unable to continue not sharing our bread with them and making sure they take their seat at the table.

The final lesson I want us to pull from these passages today concerns who we are in this story. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given that we have two scripture readings, there are two answers to this question. I would argue that, in the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus, we are the brothers. “I have five brothers,” the rich man said, pleading for Lazarus to be sent to warn them about their probable fiery future. Hal said Father Abraham, they have plenty of warnings. “But if someone goes to them from the dead,” says the rich man.

There is this human idea that somehow we are more likely to learn a lesson if it comes from an unlikely source. Think of Ebenezer Scrooge. He had plenty of fellow humans encouraging him to be a better person. But it wasn't till he spent the night being escorted through time by three ghosts that he saw the light. That's a myth, Father Abraham insists. If they won't listen to Moses and the prophets, a ghost isn't going to make any difference.

The book we're discussing at Novels Tea this afternoon hinges on a similar theory. The premise of the book is that the town book-banner opens a little library outside her home. What she doesn't know is that another towns person comes in the night and replaces all her books by slipping the banned books under the dust jackets of the bland ones she'd collected for the improvement of her community. Some people realize what they're getting, but others don't. But everyone's life is changed by what they read, perhaps because of the unlikely source.

So are we the brothers? Probably sometimes. But Paul calls us ambassadors for Christ, entrusted with the message of reconciliation. So I think we might also be the unlikely source that the world needs. We may have the good news someone needs to hear in order to dare to live the way they've been longing to live. We may have the message of reconciliation someone needs to put their life back together. We may be the beloved community someone needs in order to experience themselves as a beloved child of God. Not that we've accomplished beloved community, but that we're over here trying, building and re-building, adjusting as we learn better, extending mercy when things fall apart.

As one part of God's broader beloved community spread across the globe, we'll need to do a lot of listening, if we want to be part of an anti-racist church. There are a lot of names we still need to learn. There are a lot of finer points of racial justice diplomacy we'll need to integrate into our faith practice if we want to be ambassadors of reconciliation. But maybe we can be the unlikely source someone needs to begin that journey alongside us. Maybe we can help others see beyond the brokenness of our world, to the vision of beloved community that Jesus offers us. Maybe we can help each other see that new creation too. Hallelujah and Amen.