

“Revelry of the Loungers”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Congregational Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
September 25, 2022 – Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15; Luke 16:19-31

If you were to be in need of a new mattress to sleep on, you might head to one of our local furniture stores to try out different kinds before buying one. You might go to Jordan’s, just up the road in Reading, where you could be helped to identify the perfect mattress for your body size and preferences by being introduced to BridgeIT, Jordan’s computer-powered mattress matching system. I imagine that if you were to go and work with BridgeIT, regardless of your body size or shape, desired mattress firmness or softness, or preference in manufactures, she would *definitely not* recommend that you get a bed of ivory, as was the sleeping apparatus of choice for those who received the harsh words from the prophet Amos that we read in today’s first scripture lesson, for lying on a bed of ivory just doesn’t sound very comfortable for any body type or preference, does it?

Clearly, however, there were some in ancient Israel, where Amos preached some 800 years before Jesus was born in Bethlehem and placed in a manger there as his first bed, who did find comfort by lying on beds of ivory, lounging away on those uncomfortable (but very expensive) berths while feasting on lamb and veal, chugging bowls of wine, and dousing themselves with the finest oils -- all symbols of great wealth. The problem that Amos has with this revelry of the loungers is that it was being done by the few wealthy people who were joyously carefree and oblivious to the needs of the many poor around them. And Amos warns the partying loungers that their lack of concern for their neighbors in need would lead to them being the first to be taken away in exile, which indeed happened only 25 years or so after Amos proclaimed his message when the Neo-Assyrian Empire conquered the Kingdom of Israel and led its people away into captivity.

Our second scripture lesson from the gospel of Luke also tells us about a couple of loungers. Jesus tells a parable about a poor man, named Lazarus, who, by the way, is the only character in all of Jesus’ parables to receive a name, and who is lying uncomfortably outside the gate of the home of a rich man. Poor Lazarus had no food and so longed while he lounged to eat even the crumbs that fell from the rich man’s table. Poor Lazarus was not only hungry but in pain from sores that

covered his body, sores that were licked by the neighborhood's roaming dirty dogs. And so hungry, sore-covered Lazarus lounged on the dirt, the lowest of the low, seeking some help from his wealthy neighbor that his suffering might be eased until he died and was lifted up and carried away by the angels to enjoy the afterlife in paradise, where he would lounge for eternity in the peaceful bosom of his ancestor Abraham.

The rich man, who wore the finest clothing and feasted sumptuously each day while living, also lounged in dirt when he died and was buried. Unlike Lazarus, in the afterlife he was tormented, becoming the lowest of the low. And just as Lazarus longed for a scrap of food from the rich man while living, the rich man now longed for just a drop of water from Lazarus to cool his tongue, easing his suffering as he burned in an eternal fire.

My, how the tides had turned for Lazarus and the rich man, as Jesus promised throughout his own time of prophetic preaching they would for the rich and poor. In the tradition of Amos and the other prophets, Jesus continued to proclaim the message that the loungers who revel comfortably on their high beds of ivory will someday be brought low while those who languish while lounging upon the dirt of the earth in poverty will someday be lifted up.

This message is to be for us a cause for hope when we find ourselves lounging in dirt, that God cares for us when we are lowly. God cares especially for the lowliest among us, those that are unseen and uncared for as though they don't matter at all, and there will be a time when the lowly are lifted up.

This messages also provide us a call to action, for while we might identify with lowly Lazarus, we might also identify with the rich man, living our lives in wealthy comfort while being oblivious to the suffering of those in need around us. Or when we do see the poor and their plight, we, like the rich man even while burning in Hades, see them as our servants, tools to be directed and used to make our lives more comfortable or easy, rather than as named people to be known and loved and served *by* us.

I believe that we can all identify with the five brothers of the rich man, who receive while they are living the call of the books of Moses and the Prophets to repent of their ways of being oblivious to the needs of the poor. We all receive and can all heed this call, the call echoed by Jesus, and do the work of pulling

some of the ways of heaven, where the lowly are lifted up, into this earthly life, so that even while we are living in this realm, those who are suffering might have their fortunes turned. And perhaps by opening our eyes to the needs of hurting people, and not averting our gaze from them as it so much easier and more comfortable for us to do, but doing what we can to care for people, we can turn something in ourselves around, be a little less miserable, and discover more of heaven's peace and joy within us.

So let us truly see people and their needs and let us care and provide care. Let us continue to use our resources here to offer an extravagant welcome to people with hungry bodies by feeding them. Let us continue to serve families, many of whom are stressed out, by caring for their children and helping to raise them up as people who care for one another and the world. Let us always be actively engaged in all kinds of ministries here to care for people and lift them up, and let us always be steadfast in using our resources in ways that bless people in need around the world. As we do so, may we as a church, and each one of us who is a part of this caring family of faith, be lifted up by God. Amen.