

OPEN GATE
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September 25, 2016
26th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

The greatest challenge of the day is: how to bring about a revolution of the heart, a revolution which has to start with each one of us. **Dorothy Day**

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Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, wept his eyes out over the plight of his people and their land. At that time many proclaimed: *peace, peace*; but there was no peace. Tranquility, maybe. But no peace. For without justice there can be no peace.

Jeremiah had reason for sorrow and reason to despair but his sorrow did not exclude hope. Just as property values plunged due to an impending military invasion, he bought a piece of property, put the deed of purchase in a jar and buried it, saying. *Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.* (Jeremiah 32:1-15)

It was an investment in the future based on his trust in a God who would never forsake the earth, its peoples or creatures, no matter how grim things looked. Sorrow does not exclude hope. We can reconstitute the world with a vision of universal kinship.

Last week I ran into a young friend who had for some time been working for Wells Fargo. I asked him if he still was. No, he said. He quit two years ago. He had observed the unethical practices afoot in that company and just up and quit. He wanted no part of it. Good for you, I said. It made me proud to know him.

The love of money, said the Apostle Paul, is the root of all evil. Not money itself. But the *love* of money. Greed for money, power or privileges can blind us.

Once again low level and relatively poor employees were sacrificed but the rich didn't lose a thing. It's an old story and it played out millions of times during the recent financial crisis as banks foreclosed on one homeowner after another. Many lost everything. But a few made a killing.

It's a parable of sorts on the way the world works. But it doesn't have to be that way. We can change. We can reconstitute the world with a vision of universal kinship in which all belong.

If the love of money is the root of all evil, the love of the kinship of God must be the root of all good.

Jesus said, once upon a time a certain rich man lived in luxury within his gated compound. Outside the gate lay a poor, starving man named Lazarus. The dogs licked his sores. (Luke 16:19-31)

This is a story about two people, one extremely rich and the other extremely poor. But each can stand for two different worlds—one world rich; the other poor. Or each can stand for a class of people or race of people within a nation. One revels in wealth, power and privilege secure behind gates while the other takes a beating daily or is shot dead just for being black.

Every day the rich man walked passed Lazarus. Every day Lazarus begged for a few crumbs from the rich man's table. The rich man never noticed.

Then one day—as I imagine it—the rich man saw a sign posted on his gate. **POOR LIVES MATTER.** He stopped, stared, chewed on his lower lip and then went on through

the gate up the elevator and into his penthouse. Something about that sign ate at him. He poured himself a glass of wine and then another and slipped into a stupor.

The next day he removed POOR LIVES MATTER and replaced it with his own sign: ALL LIVES MATTER. He patted himself on the back. Patted each dog on the head. Then he stepped over Lazarus and skipped on down the street through a gate and into his yacht club.

The rich man died, said Jesus, and landed in a place of torment. The poor man died and landed in a place of comfort, leaning on Abraham's bosom, next to the heart that held the ancient promise of universal kinship—all peoples blessed, safe, respected, prosperous and free. That was the vision of the world that Jesus loved and for which he gave his life. That vision prompted this dramatic, cautionary tale.

Between the two stood a wide chasm. We might think this is a portrait of the popular notion of heaven and hell. This is not that.

Jesus used a fictional device—much like the ghosts in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*—to awaken us to the consequences of our choices here and now. We can close the gate against the world or we can push it open.

We can push it open and come out from behind our invisible walls of privilege and allow compassion to awaken. No, we can't turn back the privileges of our birth lottery; but we can turn them around for the benefit of others.

BLACK LIVES MATTER is a wake up call to a nation that for too long has not seen black lives as equal in dignity and worth. If you're paying attention and understand American history, you will know that at this time in this country that's a message that must not be diluted by other well-meaning slogans.

The rich man, said Jesus, looked up from his hellhole and saw Lazarus lounging in comfort. Father Abraham, I beg you, send Lazarus to me. Let him dip his finger in water and come cool the tip of my tongue. Too late, said Father Abraham. In your lifetime you had opportunities to live in community with Lazarus but now it's too late. *Didn't you see the sign on your gate?*

Then I beg you, cried the rich man, send Lazarus to warn my brothers to change their ways lest they end up like me. No, said Father Abraham. Your brothers have the prophets. Let them listen to them. If that doesn't convince them, someone coming back from the dead won't either.

And what do the prophets and all ethical traditions say? *Treat others as you want to be treated.* It's that simple.

It's not that we can't make the world a better place. We can and we are.

If you get your news of the world from television or social media you might conclude that the world is heading for hell in a hand basket. The media's view of the world is dark and grim.

But what few of us know is that over the past 100 years or so more people have gotten out of destitute poverty than at any other time thanks in part to globalization of trade, patent protection laws, capital investment in small upstart industries, medical and agricultural inventions, and yes, government regulations like environmental protection laws and programs like food stamps, the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), Women, Infant and Children (WIC) supplements and Medicaid that benefit many of our societies most vulnerable.

It's not that we can't make the world a better place. We can and we are.

We mustn't resign to despair. We must continue to build the city of God, the community of universal kinship where all are welcomed, respected, treated fairly and loved deeply.