

“Enough is so vast a sweetness”

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

18 September 2022

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Texts: Amos 8:4-7

Luke 16:19-31

“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table.”

~ Luke 16:19-21a

Prayer

Holy One,

Quiet our thoughts

And startle us again this morning

With the power of the Gospel

To comfort, unsettle, surprise, free and change us.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts

Be pleasing to you, O God, our Rock and Salvation. Amen.

On the first Tuesday of my vacation in Brazil, I woke up early and headed to Rio’s newest museum – “Museu do Amanhã” or in English “The Museum of Tomorrow” – that opened its doors to the public in December of 2015. I did not know what to expect of a museum with a futuristic architecture, innovative sustainable features, designed by the visionary Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava, where science and technology mix with art and culture to wrestle with complex and often divisive issues such as environmental degradation and humanity’s future on Earth, but I knew Tuesday was my lucky day because admission to the museum is free on Tuesdays (I did not know it at the time) and I stood in a long line behind scads of public school children accompanied by their seemingly unflappable teachers.

As I followed the line of chatty and electrified 1st graders toward the museum’s permanent exhibition floor, I paused to take in the ambitious and, honestly, courageous questions the Museum of Tomorrow asks: Where did we come from? Where are we? Who are we? Where are we going? and How do we want to live? I thought I was ready to jump into those five big themes: the Cosmos, the Earth, Us, the Anthropocene and our potential Tomorrows until the kids and I walked through the “Cosmic Portal” into a black dome. Inside, I leaned against a wooden frame meant to steady grownups. The 20+ students along with their formidably agile and ever-watchful teachers took their places on the floor in front of me. Then the lights were switched off and we embarked on a scientific voyage filled with mystery, beauty, surprises and even poetry. For about 10 minutes, we were all

enveloped by a 360-degree film that compressed 13.8 billion years of the universe's history into astonishing images. We saw the explosive expansion of the universe that created the universal laws of physics and flooded the cosmos with chemical elements that formed galaxies and planets. The 1st graders were transfixed at the scenes that showed giant clouds of those elemental particles and atoms become the building blocks for a world of biochemistry and biology and life itself. Among giggles, gasps, half-suppressed screams and spontaneous applause that was quickly silenced by the teachers, the kids watched with almost palpable fascination the formation of the Earth, the evolution of life and the birth of human consciousness and thought. Honestly, I couldn't focus on the film because the reaction of those 1st graders to knowledge and science, the wonder in their eyes, and the thought that what we do or fail to do today will impact their tomorrow both delighted and gripped my heart. It's a bit embarrassing to say this and I don't think anyone even noticed, but I was so taken by that sacred moment of delight and uneasiness that I couldn't hold back my tears.

Later, as those 1st grade-students and I meandered around dozens of interactive stations that allowed us to shape different futures for human life and the planet based on the kind of lifestyle people desire to have, we learned that if every single human being on Earth consumed at the rate of the average Brazilian, humanity would need two Earths to keep up with the Brazilian ecological footprint. If everyone on the planet lived like Americans do, the Global Footprint Network estimates that it would take five Earths to sustain the demand on land, sea and other natural resources to produce everything the world would consume. Of course, the explanation for our privilege to consume so much of the Earth's resources is simple: we can do it because most of humankind gets by daily with so little and, oftentimes, with barely enough to survive. We live with millions of poor, hungry, thirsty, homeless, forsaken, rejected, vulnerable and sick "Lazaruses" at our gates.

Already in the mid-8th century BCE, the prophet Amos was questioning the way of life in the Northern Kingdom of Israel where the pursuit of financial gain and wealth at any price was widening the gap between the rich people and "the Lazaruses" of the time. Known as "the prophet of social justice," Amos was the first prophetic voice in Israel's history to point out the dissonance between the religious beliefs and practices of the wealthy and their lifestyle and business dealings. The economically successful merchant class couldn't wait for the religious holidays to be over to get back to their dishonest, corrupt and exploitative means of getting richer. And yet, somehow, those same well-off businesspeople had convinced themselves that if they went through the motions of the religious festivals and holy days, the new moon and the sabbath, they could justify their success and wealth as being an indisputable sign of God's favor and blessings. But Amos wouldn't let them get away with their rampant greed and abusive lifestyle. The prophet exposed the various elaborate tricks and clever ploys the rich used to increase their material prosperity on the back of the poor and needy. Without mincing words, Amos told the people of the Northern Kingdom that at the root of everything that was wrong in their society was an inordinate and incessant desire of the heart to make more money and have more stuff that money can buy. The citizens of the Northern Kingdom had made a virtue

out of the goal of accumulation and consumption. They created a system that harmed the poor, perpetuated inequality and rewarded predatory business practices. And Amos had the unenviable God-given mission of speaking truth to power. He had to tell the comfortable and well-to-do people of a country where he was an outsider and non-native resident that the weight of their expensive lifestyle was crushing the underprivileged and jeopardizing the future of their nation. Their wealth might give them a false sense of security and make them indifferent to human suffering and the dignity of the poor, but God wouldn't overlook their deeds. **"God's judgment was coming,"** Amos announced bravely to the people of the Northern Kingdom, and no matter how religiously they observed their holy days, God's love for the poor would collide with their desire for more and better and with their failure to recognize their complicity in the economic structures that trampled on the needy and brought ruin to the poor of the land.

At the heart of the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus lies the undeniable and unavoidable Judeo-Christian moral imperative to see other people's hunger, suffering, pain, their illnesses, their poverty and to have the courage to do something about what we see. This Gospel story is neither a pie-in-the-sky promise of comfort to the poor in this life nor a blank condemnation of the rich; Jesus told this parable and the evangelist preserved it to remind the Church that our Sacred texts, our religious tradition, our faith and our God require that we have the courage to take notice of the "Lazaruses" around us. The Christian faith mandates that we name what causes economic inequality in our country. The Gospel calls on us to acknowledge our own collusion with the system that lock most of the world's population out of the prosperity we enjoy and instinctively protect. Christianity urges us to let the teachings of Christ change our worldview so rather than longing for more and better, we learn to share our wealth and live simply, gratefully and joyfully with just enough.

In his most recently published book, *"The Flag, The Cross, and The Station Wagon,"* which a few of our church members are reading this month, author Bill McKibben takes on this radical and fundamental Christian mandate to confront the structures of oppression, discrimination and socioeconomic injustice that have cemented into place a White-Black wealth gap in our society. McKibben notes that this economic chasm has had a cumulative and permanent impact on Black families. A study conducted by Northwestern University in 2020 found that **"for every one dollar of accumulated wealth that white families have, black families have just one cent."**ⁱ Looking back at his childhood in Lexington, which is only 12 miles down the road from our church, McKibben wonders what happened to that suburban America, which seemed like a kind of modest paradise that was destined to spread prosperity to the rest of the country. He laments that the affluent suburbs, which became the greatest wealth accumulation engine for White families, were off limits to Blacks because Black couples were systematically denied the bank loans that allowed his parents to buy their home in Lexington in 1970 for \$30,000.

Much like the rich man in the parable, McKibben says that the well-meaning, liberal populace of his childhood town chose in the 70's not to see any "Lazaruses" in the streets

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of Lexington. Voters put into place a structure of social and racial discrimination that prevented the construction of affordable multifamily housing that would have given Black families the opportunity to move in and become their neighbors. The citizens of Lexington, McKibben wrote, “**were fine with the concept of civil rights and inclusion and being a good neighbor as long as it required no actual sacrifice.**”ⁱⁱ And what this meant is that the vast majority of Blacks in America did not have a chance to buy the ticket that would have given them a fair chance to build, accumulate and pass on to their children the wealth that White suburban families in places like Acton have been able to amass, enjoy and use to benefit future generations of White Americans. And those few Black families who did manage to move into predominantly white suburbs were quite often driven out.ⁱⁱⁱ Quoting Richard Rothstein, author of “*The Color of Law*,” McKibben makes the astonishing comment that “**moving from an urban apartment to a suburban home is incomparably more difficult than registering to vote, applying for a job, or changing seats on a bus.**”^{iv} This shocking level of difficulty and the barriers that keep Blacks out of the suburbs are very much built into the structure of our society intentionally to keep the affluent American suburb from ever having to see or interact with the Lazarus at the gate.

Bill McKibben recognizes, sees, and bravely names the historic injustice and discrimination that over the last decades generated and sustained suburban prosperity. In his book he confesses that his family “**got an unearned boost the whole time: the economic wind was at [their] backs, the gravity of money was tugging in [their] direction. And others, because of the color of their skin, faced an unrelenting headwind. Economic gravity kept pulling them down.**”^v

It would be easy to give into moral apathy and say that this is the way of the world and there is nothing that we can do about it; there will always be wealthy people and “Lazaruses” in our society. But as Father Abraham says to the rich man in Hades – we do have Moses and the Prophets and also the Christian Scriptures that insist on asking us to have the spiritual strength and the moral courage not only to name today’s “Lazaruses” but also do something to change their circumstances, which in truth are also our circumstances. We are together in this world whether we are rich or Lazarus, suburbanites or urban-dwellers, Black or White, older or young.

Bill McKibben speaks very honestly when he says that “**affluent white Americans have built such a massive lead in wealth that they, in effect, control the game... their victory is locked in,**”^{vi} but the “**extraordinary wealth accumulated in those [suburbs] and in that generation... wasn’t used to build a better country. The sense of national unity dwindled; the religious faith that had helped order communities melted away. Mass prosperity itself turned into the most dangerous weapons of all, unleashing the flood of carbon that raised the temperature of the earth till the poles melted.**”^{vii} “**Looking back,**” McKibben ponders, “[that vote to bar subsidizing housing in Lexington] **symbolizes the hyper-individualism that has marked my lifetime. The selfishness.**”^{vii} Then McKibben reaches back to the foundational document of the country and invites those who were alive in 1970 and today have the financial resources and political power to

make something new and brave of the great American ideal that “***all men are created equal.***” He invites people like you who are attending the service this morning to use your wealth, your voice, your time, your political influence, your privilege and your faith “***to take [American] history off rewind and put it again in forward motion.***”^{viii}

You may not be prepared to talk about reparations for Black Americans this morning or accept that the winds of financial prosperity have been on your back even though you did nothing to deserve it. You were just lucky to be born white and into a suburban family in North America. You may not want to hear that others around the world have to be poor so that you may afford to wear expensive clothes and feast sumptuously. There is no question that it is very uncomfortable to be reminded that our way of life is unsustainable and that our wealth accumulation and level of consumption can only be maintained because there are so many human beings who lack the very basic needs to live with dignity. Perhaps the last thing any one of us wants to hear in worship is that the weight of our lifestyle, our ecological footprint is crushing the planet and depleting Earth’s natural resources. But it is here in this sacred space that the ancient words of Amos and the Parable of Jesus offer us the moral compass to guide us toward a life where we can see the structural injustice and systemic inequalities in our world without losing hope because we are finally willing to do something to begin to put history into a forward motion instead of allowing it to keep repeating what has been clearly wrong. It is here in this time of worship that the Holy Spirit challenges us to use our wealth and our resources to do something that expresses our deepest conviction that no human being should live in abject poverty while the other lives in the lap of luxury.

Mahatma Gandhi once said very wisely that “***the world has enough for everyone’s needs but not everyone’s greed.***”^{ix} “***The fundamental law of Nature, without exception,***” He continued, “[is] ***that Nature produces enough for our wants from day to day, and if only everybody took enough for himself and nothing more [...] there would be no man dying of starvation in this world.***”^x

If only we could dare to live with enough, we might reject the prevailing economic philosophy that in order to stay at the top of the ladder we need a multitude to remain at the bottom to hold it up for us. If only we embraced the worldview that there is enough, we might stop believing that more is better and might start making the collective sacrifice required to narrow the wealth gap between Whites and Blacks, between Acton and Roxbury, between America and Haiti. If we only lived with enough, we would quit wondering if the “Lazaruses” at our gates are a drain on our wealth and we would finally support economic policies of wealth redistribution that can dismantle the unjust structures of inequality and discrimination and might help us to live a lifestyle of enough-ness.

After I left the Museum of Tomorrow, its name got stuck in my head. I wondered why it was not baptized as the “Museum of Sustainability” or “The Museum of Environmental Science” or “The Museum of Applied Sciences” or even “The Museum of the Future.” I turned to the all-knowing Google and was inspired by the words of Hugo

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Barreto, the Head Director of Content at the new museum. Barreto said that when people think about the future, we usually imagine a time very distant and faraway. That's the reason for the choice of "Tomorrow." Tomorrow is closer. It conveys the idea of something more immediate. Tomorrow depends on what we do and how we live today.^{xi}

I honestly do not know what we can do today to begin to change the inequality, injustice and discrimination in our country and in the world and put history in forward motion. According to Jesus, we do have everything we need to have our hearts changed, our eyes opened, our lives transformed and actions synched with what we believe. So perhaps today we just need to reflect on the message of the prophet and the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus and hold on to the moral compass these sacred Scriptures give to the Church. Perhaps you can read Bill McKibben's book or make a donation to an organization that helps people of color find affordable homes in affluent suburbs. Perhaps, all you can decide to do today is to start believing in the poetic and powerful words that Emily Dickinson declared to the woman she loved, "***Enough is so vast a sweetness.***"^{xii} Earth's tomorrow will be much brighter, if those of us who are the wealthiest and biggest consumers on the planet take seriously and adopt the sweetness of enough as a way of life. This may be the best first step to make sure everybody on Earth will have enough and the planet will have a peaceful and hopeful tomorrow.

May it be so, my friends. May it be so. Amen.

ⁱ By Paul Caine in Study: Black Families Have 1 Cent for Every Dollar White Families Have, WTTW, 20 June 2020, [https://news.wttw.com/2020/06/10/study-black-families-have-1-cent-every-dollar-white-families-have].

ⁱⁱ Bill McKibben in The Flag, The Cross, and The Station Wagon, p. 80 [Kindle Edition].

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 69.

^{iv} Ibid., p. 80.

^v Ibid., p. 72.

^{vi} Ibid., p. 68.

^{vii} Ibid., p. 21.

^{viii} Ibid., p. 84.

^{ix} Quoted by Joji Valli in An Antidote for Selfishness, 1.3 – Egoism the Foster-Father of Greed.

^x Ibid.

^{xi} By Dom Phillips in Rio's flashy new Museum of Tomorrow overlooks a big problem of today, The Washington Post, 15 December 2015 [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/12/19/rios-flashy-new-museum-of-tomorrow-overlooks-a-big-problem-of-today/].

^{xii} James Reeves in Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson, p. xv.