

Saint Paul's 9/28/25

Proper 21C
Amos 6:1a, 4-7
Psalm
1Timothy 6:6-19
Luke 16: 19-31

As an inhabitant of a one-story home, I'm grateful. My knees are grateful; my back is grateful. The laundry room is on the same floor as the bedrooms, and the garbage doesn't have to be hauled up and back down the hilled driveway – as in our previous home. The mailbox is, likewise, also on the same level as the house.

I could go on and on about the good things in the home that Michael and I moved into more than three years ago now, but I think one of the best is the fact that it has a most excellent fence all the way around the backyard. My roommate, Daisy-the-Dachshund, thinks this is swell and she runs in and out whenever the door is open and, has become acquainted with the other dogs in the neighborhood – especially those who live in the four houses whose yards butt up against that large fence line. Lilly, Leo, Jasper, Gracie, Tater, and Pepper all yip up a storm whenever Daisy begins a canine conversation and they often go on and on until one of us dog owners, yells, "Stop barking!!" I have met, through the tall fence, several of the other dogs' owners, but it is usually by listening, because I can't see any of them through that 6-ft. solid fence. Likewise, Daisy has never officially met any of her canine acquaintances...but she does have half-inch glimpses of them between the boards.

In his poem "Mending Walls," Robert Frost wrote that "Good fences make good neighbors. . . "And that's true, I expect. Fences create a border line for the social and personal boundaries necessary for maintaining respectful interactions between people. I mean, I'd prefer that Leo and Tater stay in their own yards...as would Daisy...so the fence

makes that possible. But, apart from that, fences have their negative aspect. They shut us out from one another – (that and you have to paint and keep them up.) I mean they are great in that they keep things like bicycles, and lawn furniture in an enclosed place, but in providing that sort of safe place, they also shut us off from our neighbors and, potentially, their needs – what might be going on...right under our noses....

And so it was with the unnamed wealthy man, who liked to have his stuff in a safe place – within a fenced-in area. (He left through a gate.) So, though his stuff was safe, he failed to see and/or act on the needs of the world just outside his home. He even seemed to miss Lazarus when he would leave his home. . . so maybe it wasn't just the fence - because Lazarus wasn't hiding. He wasn't under a freeway overpass or in a church courtyard, he was right there. *It's funny what we can't see.*

Charisse Tucker, writer for *Christian Century*, told a story of a fence. "I visited a church where large courtyards and breezeways create a protective haven for a handful of people experiencing homelessness (and) who sleep there each night. Nestled alongside walls in the cold months and in the shade in the summer, the small community seems to find a measure of comfort. By an agreement forged with the church's leaders, they arrive after the workday ends and leave the next morning before it begins. As they gather their few possessions each day, a church member distributes simple bag lunches to carry with them. The arrangement has worked so well that more people are seeking shelter on the church's property. Unfortunately, a rift is developing between the church and some neighbors who do not want the church's over-night guests so close to their homes. Hoping that familiarity might bridge the gap, the pastor invited neighbors to meet them and learn their names. Still complaints have rolled into city council, which has formed a task force to

“look into the homeless problem.” Recently a local resident posted on social media: “you know you’re from here if you’ve never seen a person who is homeless.” (unquote) So, the author (and I) wonder if this comment is meant to be ironic? Or does it represent the writer’s lack of awareness? I mean, there are homeless individuals right there, and all around us. . . are they seen? Are their needs known? Or met?

And, speaking of a lack of awareness, the wealthy man, in today’s gospel lived a sumptuous life, dressing in rich fabrics, eating, drinking, and feeling merry. . . but we don’t know much else about him. Did he live alone? Did he have many friends? We don’t know, but the one thing we **do** know is that he knew Lazarus’ name, for he used it when he addressed Father Abraham from his vantage point in Hades. So, *we know he knew of Lazarus*, and maybe even that he was in need, but he seemed not to take action regarding those needs. Was there, as the Rev. Joslyn Schaefer says, a “callus”¹ over his soul so thick that Lazarus’ plight didn’t affect him?

And maybe we all have a little callus over our souls when we are too concerned about our own lives, or social media, or politics or the next ping on our phones. That all buffers us from being able to see through the fence, into the world.

Charles Taylor, Catholic philosopher, coined the term “buffered self.” He contrasted the *buffered self* with the *porous self*, a person who is open to the transcendent, or to encounters of reality that may be surprising, or make us uncomfortable, like encountering needy Lazarus just outside the gate.

Buffered or porous...which are we? The Holy Spirit works overtime trying to get our attention – whether from the other side of the fence or right there on our side of the fence –

¹ <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/real-life-pentecost-16-c-september-25-2022/>

to pull us out of ourselves, and maybe poke holes in our defenses. We've all had those ah-ha moments when we actually become aware of something that needs us. . . a process of conversion, I suppose, and a monumental process.

The rich man's buffered life was there with him in Hades as he cried out to Father Abraham, and that gulf between them probably will remain until he can see the full humanity of Lazarus, until the scope of his concern for others' wellbeing extends beyond his own immediate kin.²

The buffered self is easy to find and identify – especially in today's news: For example, when the governor of one state rounds up a plane full of refugees, freshly arrived in this country. They are exhausted, frightened, and away from everything familiar. They have had to leave their homes to walk thousands of miles to a strange country, suffering all sorts of fearful events. Then, said governor promises them jobs, homes and security (none of which exist) in another state before he flies them there. ***That** is an example of the buffered self.* A governor who was unable to see the pain and suffering in those refugees, that they'd walked all those miles because life was so difficult in their home country. Most do not want to leave their homes....few people do. A governor who could only see the fact *they* were putting a strain on the state budget; a governor who wanted to score some political points to get attention; ***That** governor* is a target for the work of the Holy Spirit, and **may it be so**. The gulf between the two is filled by God whose Spirit works in him, *we pray*, nudging him to see the needs in the world, to look over the fence, to become that porous self.

² Ibid.

But let us not be fooled into thinking that it is only *the other* who does not see over the fence. We all have times of being the buffered self, of realizing the callus over our senses. Of being like the rich man who ignores the needy right outside his gate.

The homeless are outside of our fence, even if we don't have one. *Jesus may have* aimed this parable at everyone who knows they will still have food next week and a safe place to sleep night after night – that's each of us, I'd guess.

We know each other well in this congregation. And I know how much each of you (and the congregation itself) do for the needs of those in our communities. Last week, we started the process of gathering information for our profile about just who we are here at St. Paul's and Iglesia de la Resurreccion. All that information is still on the boards and will be for some time...keep track of it and add to it, if something comes to you. I was so taken by all that showed up regarding what is going on here at St. Paul's regarding meeting the needs of the world. We were asked, during last week's sermon, "so...how's your prayer life??" Our preacher said he is asked that question regularly by both his bishop and his S. Director. It's a pertinent question...especially when we consider that Francis of Assisi said this, "Pray without ceasing; Use words if necessary..." And our own BCP mentions that prayer can be with words - or actions. "So, how's your prayer life? . . .How's your action? We answer the needs of the world....and see the needy right outside our gates all with our prayers.

Ken Burns made a short series that gave a disturbing look at what was America's response to the Holocaust – another time of deep and agonizing pain and need. Mr. Burns was interviewed several times during the series, and he was asked what, in his mind, could be done to help change things, for this sort of callousness seems deep in our culture today.

Burns' answer was powerful. He said you tell stories that describe the situation over and over and over again. Jesus did that in the parables he told. And God keeps sending the message, *that there is a better way, and that is the way of love*. May we always notice and act; may we always be aware of the needs just over the fence; may we know and act on that better way so that it is deeply present in this time and place.

AMEN.