
It is Not Too Late!

A sermon by the Rev. Canon Julia Mitchener
The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 21, Year C

Parker Palmer, a Quaker theologian known for his gentle spirit and for his writings on non-violence and the importance of living in sync with one's core values, once found himself cursing furiously as he dangled from the side of a mountain. He was on an Outward Bound trip and things were not going well. Trying to rappel down a sheer rock face, Palmer had gotten himself stuck. Between himself and the only way down to safety, there was a large hole. A crater, actually. An abyss. And so Palmer began hurling epithets around and hurling himself around, too, doing everything he could to stay out of the hole, only to find that he wasn't getting anywhere. Finally, one of the instructors on the trip called up to him: Parker, I think it's time you learned the Outward Bound motto: *If you can't get out of it, get into it.* If you can't get out of it, get into it. In other words, if you stop trying so hard to avoid what you fear and instead lean into it, you'll come unstuck. And sure enough, he did.

This morning's gospel lesson finds Jesus addressing a group of people who are stuck, not on the side of a mountain, but stuck nonetheless. Stuck in their tendency to see things only from their own perspective. Stuck in their attachment to judging others while giving themselves a free pass. Stuck in their failure to notice the needs of those around them even when they are lying right at their doorstep. And so Jesus tells them a story:

Two men, Jesus says—two men, one rich, the other poor—die. The poor man, Lazarus, goes straight to paradise. The rich man goes to a somewhat less pleasant locale. Looking up, the rich man sees Lazarus, who used to beg for table scraps, now dining on—oh, I don't know, let's say caviar and Veuve Cliquot. So the rich guy asks if Lazarus could reach down to him and hand him, at the very least, some Doritos and a Miller Lite. To which the answer comes back, *No. No. Why?* Not out of spite, but because there's a divide, an abyss—a chasm—between the two men, and it is one that cannot be navigated, not even by the most practiced Outward Bound instructor.

This chasm is nothing new. Though the poor man, Lazarus, spent his earthly life starving and covered in sores just outside the rich man's gates, he might as well have lived halfway around the world. For the rich man never engaged with him—never looked at him or spoke his name, much less gave him anything to eat.

It's easy to suppose this not very fun little story is designed primarily as a kind of warning, one meant to encourage good behavior in anticipation of some future reward (*Be kind to those in need right now so that you never have to end up like that guy begging Lazarus for cheap beer*). And yet the truth is that this morning's gospel lesson is not really a story about the future. Rather, it is a story about the here and now. Literally. This is a story about the here and now, it is a story about today, for you and I, too, live in a world of great chasms—social, political, economic, racial, religious, you name it.

We live in a world of great chasms, of great divisions. And we live in a time in which it often feels like it's too late to do anything about them. And yet here is where the Good News of this morning's gospel lesson lies. For while Jesus' story makes clear that it is too late for the Rich Man and Lazarus, it is not too late for the people to whom the story is addressed. It is not too late for those to whom the story is addressed. Which includes us, of course. It is not too late for us.

It is not too late for us, even, and especially, during this painful period in which we are living, this time in which many are taking the attitude, *That's all, folks! It's over. We're cooked!* You know what I mean. You've done the doom scrolling at 3 a.m., I know you have. I know I have. You've gotten lured by some algorithm into clicking on all the worst headlines: *No possible end to war in Gaza. Left blames Right and Right blames Left for latest act*

of political violence. No way to end homelessness or keep guns out of schools, experts say.

Now please understand: I am not here to make light of these very difficult days through which we are living. What I am here to do is to proclaim the great Good News of Jesus in the midst of the individual and collective pain and anxiety so many people are experiencing. It is not too late to abandon our cynicism and despair and instead to put all our trust in the One whom even the abyss of death could not hold. It is not too late. You know, Jesus actually loves latecomers! You remember his story about the day laborers, the ones who don't show up for work until almost midnight but still get paid the same as the ones who were there at the crack of dawn? Jesus loves latecomers! And he does his best work when it is completely obvious to everyone else that the clock has run out, that time is up. *It is finished. Jesus breathed his last.* But wait! Hold up. That's not how that story ends. Not at all. No. *He is not here, for he has risen, just as he told you.*

It is not too late. It is not too late to ask our society to live by the standards of our baptismal covenant—the basic standards of all the major religions—and to respect the dignity of every human being. It is not too late to change the structures that allow one in five children to go to bed hungry each night and that make it near impossible for many hardworking Atlantans to afford housing. It is not too late to seek peace, whether in our own homes and among our own families or in our country or across the globe. It is not too late to allow ourselves to get swept up in the redemptive and life-giving work of Jesus Christ, who never encountered a chasm he could not bridge. Who entered the greatest abyss of all for us, the abyss of sin and death, getting into it so that we could get out of it. Who inspired the Apostle Paul, who, as you may recall, had been really into persecuting people who were different from him—who inspired the Apostle Paul eventually to proclaim, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

It is not too late. It is not too late, but we are going to have to get into it; we are going to have to lean in and do the counterintuitive thing. Rather than trying to escape by cursing our enemies, or flailing all around in a panic, or adopting a position of apathy like those “reveling loungers” in this morning's reading from the Book of Amos—rather than doing this, we are going to have lean into the abyss, even when it scares the heck out of us.

This is, in fact, one of the great markers that the Kingdom of God has come among us. That people begin doing odd and unexpected and even dangerous things for love. That people start leaning into the difficult places—and the difficult people—instead of avoiding them. Like the rabbi I once read about who took a dying member of the Ku Klux Klan into his home and cared for him as he was dying of cancer. Like the man I saw on the news who recently became the legal guardian for three neighborhood children after their mother got deported. Like the group of parishioners worshipping with, and serving a meal to, our friends at the Church of the Holy Comforter this morning—friends for whom this meal and this social interaction may prove to be the highlight of their week. Like all of you who regularly gather to have tough but life saving conversations with others at AA, Al-Anon, the Community of Hope, or a weekday Bible study.

Friends, it is not too late. It is not too late. Now is the time. Now is the place. Amen.