Yesterday a few of us went up to Holmes, NY to take part of the NYC Presbytery meeting. It was a beautiful day, not only weather wise or through the natural scenery, but we also witnessed a beautiful mosaic of God’s people across the human spectrum from all walks of life.

We were visited by the Rev. Denise Andersen, who is the former co-moderator of our denomination - the Presbyterian Church (USA). She’s now working in her new role as the mission coordinator in the office of racial ethnic and intercultural justice. In the context of worship, she invited us to reflect upon the sacred work in which we are being called – to dismantle white supremacy, systemic racism and privileges, not only in our society but in all levels of the church as well, starting from the grassroot level of the local church. We were challenged to contribute and affect change in our society, by the way we treat and relate to one another. We were encouraged to tell our stories, so others may learn from them. This way, we may all one day come to realize God’s plan for humanity by living together in equity and justice as God intends. But we’re not there just yet. The work of reconciliation, healing, and restoration of God’s kingdom must continue.

A couple of years ago, also after another Presbyterian gathering that was held in a church in Crown Height, instead of taking the subway, I decided to take the B44 bus back that runs along Nostrand Avenue to Ave. U and then transferring to the B3 home.

The moment I got on the bus, as I looked around, I noticed a rather strange phenomenon. I was the only non-black person on the entire bus, and that includes the bus driver himself. So I was kind of standing out, as I got a few stares from those who were on the bus. But that’s ok, no big deal. I got on the bus just like everyone else would, and I began to scan around looking for any open seat. And I spotted am empty two seaters all the way towards the back. So I walked over and asked a middle aged black man, probably in his 50’s, if I could sit next to him. The middle aged man looked at me and said ***"It's alright, brother. Martin Luther King taught us that we need to get along with everyone else."***

At that moment, I felt that was a pretty profound statement that he made, in light of the heightened sensitivity that we were living in at that time when it comes to race relation here in this country. This black man reached out to me and called me a “brother”. When that man got off the bus a few stops later, I called out to him “**Have a good night, Sir**!” And he responded back, “**Same to you, brother!**”

Incidentally this all took place only a few blocks away from the site of one of the most publicized race riots in this city. Just over 28 years ago in Crown Height, a black child was struck by a Hasidic Jewish motorist. This incident sparked many nights of violent protests on the streets and widened a chasm relationship between the Black and the Jewish communities of Crown Height, which was distinctly divided from one side of the Avenue to the other.

Even though we may claim to live in the same neighborhood, we ride the same bus or subway line, in the same borough, the same city or country, we’ve often seen that in many of our neighborhoods, including the ones around us, we are still very much divided to a certain degree. I believe there are still much works to be done as we strive to foster our relationships with our neighbors, as we break down our barriers and narrow our gaps.

In the gospel passage that we read earlier, Jesus told us a parable that challenged us to see the invisible suffering of the world[[1]](#footnote-1), as well as the widened chasm between those who have and those who have not, between the rich man and the poor man Lazarus. Jesus was telling this parable to describe what God’s Kingdom may look like. It’s not what we think it is, where **everything may seem to have flipped upside down and inside out. The kingdom of God seems to be reversed.** The last becomes first and the first becomes last.

The rich man was dressed in “purple and fine linen” and feasted sumptuously every day, overlooked the suffering needs of the poor and the hungry – Lazarus, who was described as being covered with sores and the dogs would come and lick his sores. You can’t get any lower than that. The rich man paid little or no attention to the poor man who often hung out outside of the rich man’s property.

When both the rich man and the poor man Lazarus died, Lazarus was the one who was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man was sent into Hades (which is another name for hell). He was being tormented and suffered in the eternal flames, while the poor man Lazarus was being comforted and embraced in the arms of God.

By the end of the story we saw that it was Lazarus, who was the one looking down from heaven, as the rich man looked up begging for Lazarus to touch his tongue with his finger and quench his thirst from the fiery flames. Some argue that the rich man got what he deserves. His pain and suffering was kind of self-inflicted, for what he had done (or perhaps didn’t do) while he was still alive.

Interestingly in this parable, Jesus withheld the identity of the rich man, but not the poor man. Usually it’s the other way around, when the least important or the marginalized person was left unidentified. Perhaps **this was a sign of what’s to come in this NEW kingdom of God.**  Lazarus, by the way, means “*God is my help!*” Well, how fittingly that is, for someone who’s at the bottom of the social ladder and someone who is always being picked on, bullied and overlooked. Lazarus’ help was dependent upon God and not anyone else.

So you may wonder, why was Jesus telling this parable? What was he trying to tell his followers, and to us today? Keep in mind, he was still hanging out with a group of Pharisees and scribes, along with other tax-collectors, so some of them might have still been there. He was illustrating to those who are seemingly privileged individuals what the kingdom of God actually would look like, that the last shall be first and the first shall be first. To those who have been privileged, this is a time of spiritual awakening and a time to respond and repent, otherwise it would be too late. To those who have been oppressed, this is a time of renewal and hope.

At the end, the rich man realized that it was simply too late for him to reverse the course and that he must bear his own consequences. Like the dishonest and shrewd manager, this rich man was so focused on keeping his material wealth but had squandered his spiritual wealth. He couldn’t take what he owned with him, so what good was it? This rich man, however, still claimed his privileges by making one last request asking if Lazarus can be sent to warn his other five brothers, so this way, they could make the wise decision about their own life and their own future. He had his chances but he squandered the opportunities. We don’t know what happened to those five brothers, perhaps it was irrelevant. Your brother cannot save you. Each person is ultimately responsible for his or her own faith and spiritual decisions, through one’s repentance.

Just as we also read earlier from Paul’s letter to Timothy, we brought nothing into this world, so that we can take nothing out with us.[[2]](#footnote-2)  But instead we shall pursue those spiritual wealths of **righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness** that God has entrusted us with. We must continue to fight the good fight of faith[[3]](#footnote-3) in order to build God’s kingdom through our extension of God’s virtues and good works towards one another. Our stockpiling of earthly treasures will not earn us a single day in heaven if we continue to dishonor what God’s plan is for us, as a beloved community founded upon God’s grace and love towards us.

Unfortunately, we live within a political and economic climate that feed upon the exploitations and domination of one group of individuals over another. The call of Christ for us all is to recognize all of these exploitations as sins against humanity and to refuse to live any longer under these lies and fabrications.[[4]](#footnote-4)

All of us have been called to engage in the ministry of reconciliation and healing, in some ways. It is not about who have more than the others, but about to whom do we more inclined to share with…not to throw the crumbs to the dogs at the tables, but to feed off one another and to welcome them to dine at the LORD’s heavenly banquet.

**Christ has chosen each of us to seek a more noble cause of reversing this kingdom through our tireless effort of reconciliation and restoration.**  So let us fix our eyes upon the heavenly prize by building new bridges and restoring broken relationships among ourselves and with our neighbors, as we collectively seek and pray, “***Thy Kingdom come, Thy Will be done…on earth as it is in heaven.”***

In closing, I would like to share with you the lyrics of one of the hymns that was written to challenge us to live courageously and missionally even through times of “twisted values”, when the world may seem to be upside-down and inside out. God continues to charge us to march forth and to uphold and to restore God’s kingdom here on earth.

**Hymn # 345 “In An Age of Twisted Values”**

*Text by Martin E. Leckebusch (1995)*

In an age of twisted values   
we have lost the truth we need.  
In sophisticated language  
we have justified our greed.  
By our struggle for possessions   
we have robbed the poor and weak.  
Hear our cry and heal our nation;  
your forgiveness, Lord, we seek.  
  
We have built discrimination  
on our prejudice and fear.  
Hatred swiftly turns to cruelty  
if we hold resentments dear.  
For communities divided   
by the walls of class and race,  
hear our cry and heal our nation;  
show us, Lord, your love and grace.

When our families are broken,  
when our homes are full of strife,   
when our children are bewildered,  
when they lose their way in life,  
when we fail to give the aged   
all the care we know they need,  
hear our cry and heal our nation;  
help us show more love, we plead.  
  
We who hear your word so often  
choose so rarely to obey.  
Turn us from our willful wandering;  
give us truth to light our way.  
In the power of your Spirit   
come to cleanse us, make us new;  
hear our cry and heal our nation   
till our nation honors you.

1. Bader-Saye Scott, *Feasting on the Word Year C, Volume 4,* p.116 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *I Timothy 6:7* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *I Timothy 6:11* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Bader-Saye Scott *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 4* P.118 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)