Last Sunday afternoon, I attended the funeral and the celebration of life worship service of our NYC Presbytery’s Moderator Ruling Elder Ted Hickman. The service took place at the *Bedford-Central Presbyterian Church* in Crown Height around Nostrand Ave. and Atlantic Ave.. As expected, there was a huge turnout, perhaps closed to 1,000 of immediate and extended friends and families, and representatives from all levels of the church were there. They came to pay their respect and tribute to honor the legacy of a gentle giant with a great big heart for God’s people.

One of Ted’s passions, dreams, and hopes, as he assumed the office of the moderator of the Presbytery back in June was to continue to build bridges and narrow the gaps between the so called “Avenue” churches and those that are struggling to even pay their bills, or their weekly guest speakers. Let’s face it, the disparity among the various churches within the Presbytery is wide and is clearly visible.

This chasm was beyond our differences in terms of our race, culture neighborhood, or economic. It is an on-going mission that we all must strive to achieve as we are entrusted with the works ahead of us as citizens of God’s kingdom here on earth – a kingdom that is already here but is also yet to come. The work of reconciliation and restoration of God’s kingdom must continue.

After the funeral service, I took the B44 Nostrand Avenue bus coming back to this neighborhood. An Epiphany moment occurred to me. The moment I got on the bus, I noticed that I was the only non-black person on the entire bus, including the driver himself. Well, that’s not a big deal. So I got on and like everyone else would, scavenged around for any open seat. The only ones I found was near the back of the bus. So I walked over and asked a middle aged black man, probably in his 50’s, if I could sit next to him, it was one of those two-seaters. That man replied, ***"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 pretty profound in light of the current climate of race relation that we are facing this country right now. When he got off the bus a few stops later, I wished him “**Have a good night, Sir**!” And he responded back, “**Same to you, brother!**”

I felt that if Ted was on that bus, it would’ve made him proud to see how we can find ways to overcome our fears or differences and to live out God’s kingdom here on earth, as witnesses of God’s love – one person at a time, one hand-shake or one smile at a time.

Incidentally this all took place only a few blocks away from the site of one of the most publicized race riots in the city of New York. Just over 25 years ago in Crown Height, a black child was killed in an auto accident by a Hasidic Jewish driver. This incident sparked many nights of violent protests on the streets and widened a chasm relationship between the African-American 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, same borough, the same city or country, as we’ve seen that many of our neighborhoods, including the ones around us, we are still very much divided to a certain degree. I believe we can and we must do better in terms of our effort to foster our relationships with our neighbors.

In the gospel lesson that we read earlier, Jesus told us a parable that presented us a greater moral challenge of seeing 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 ought to look like, where everything may seem to have flipped upside down and inside out, when it comes to our human-to-human relation with one others.

When they were both alive, the rich man, who 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. The rich man paid little or no attention to the poor man who was living outside of his property. One day when both the rich man and the poor man Lazarus died, Lazarus was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham, while the rich man was buried in Hades (which is another name for hell). The rich man was being tormented and suffered in the eternal flames for his life after death, while the poor man was being comforted 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, while the rich man was the one looking up, begging for Lazarus to touch his tongue with his finger and quench his thirst from the fiery flames. The First shall be Last; the Last shall be First.

Now you may ask, why was Jesus telling this parable to his followers, and to us today? Remember, this was addressed to all sorts of followers, including the Pharisees, the tax-collectors and those who are among the poorest of the poor. What kind of message was Jesus telling his followers concerning the Kingdom of God that he was bringing upon them and is also yet to come? What hope can we count on when and if that time does come? What action must we take right now in this life in preparation for what is to come, before it is too late?

At the end, the rich man realized that it was simply too late for him to reverse the consequences that he must bear now. He had missed out on the window of opportunity to take part of God’s eternal feast in God’s kingdom. He made one final request asking if Lazarus be sent to warn his other siblings so this way, they could make the wise decision about their life and their future.

The way we treat each other in this life time matters. Heaven and hell is not something to be decided later on, or of some distant after life. Our actions (or our non-actions) reap the consequences on others. **It is never too late for someone to repent of our sins and to restore the inequality and injustice that we, humankind, have experienced and exploited upon one another.**

Just as we learned from Paul’s letter to Timothy, as Steven read for us earlier, we brought nothing into this world, so that we can take nothing out of it.[[2]](#footnote-2)  We must pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness. These are the spiritual wealth that God has entrusted us with. We must continue to fight the good fight of faith[[3]](#footnote-3), as we build God’s kingdom not based upon our earthly goods or material standards, but 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 for us as a beloved community founded upon God’s grace and love towards us.

Furthermore, this parable challenges us not simply to share our earthly treasures but to become attentive to the poor and those who are suffering in silence all around us. Where is the invisible suffering and who is bearing the invisible scars among us today? Be it the suffering of women and children in the overseas sweatshops who made our clothes for less than a dollar day, or underpaid workers who assemble our latest technological gadgets and smartphones that corporations have profited in billions. Be it the pharmaceutical companies who raised the price of various life-dependent drugs a thousand-fold in order to make a profit for themselves. Be it the suffering animals in factory farms, who ended up on our dinner table or in our supermarket; Be it the suffering and profiling of certain categories of people who happened to share similar background or country of origins as those who inflicted terror in this world.

Unfortunately, we live within a political and economic system that feed upon the sufferings and exploitations of others. The call of Christ is to recognize all of these 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 by the storing of our treasures up in heaven and not here on earth below. It is not about who have more than the others, but about who is more inclined to share our resources with others….not throwing the crumbs at the tables to the dogs, but welcoming them to dine at the same table at the heavenly banquet.

Our God is a God of restoration and reversal. God is willing to redeem us and to rescue us from the bottomless pit and raise us up to join His heavenly banquet. Let us be a part of this reversal and restoration process while we still have this lifetime to share with one another, including those who are less fortunate that we are, and those who are different from us.

This past Wednesday (9/21) was declared by the United Nations as the ***International Day of Peace***. Yet, if we turn on the news, we don’t see much evidence of peace at all. There can be no peace for as long as we inflict hell upon each other, be it by the civilian casualties of bombing in the Middle East, or by the hands of a lone wolf terrorist who might be living next door to us and plotted to inflict harm upon others. Be it by the hands of police in Tulsa, OK or by the hands of angry protestors in Charlotte, NC. **True and lasting peace is not a personal feeling.** True Peace in God’s reign is when our hearts are in line with God, when all of God’s creations and people are valued and honored the same way with one another. True peace is realized when justice is restored and when injustice is reversed in God’s Kingdom.

Be it a physical wall that separate our neighbors from across the border, or an invisible wall across the avenues that separate one demographic group from another. **Christ has chosen each of us to seek a more noble cause of reversing this kingdom through our effortless work of reconciliation and restoration.**  We must fix our eyes upon the heavenly prize by building bridges and restoring 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 the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, Amen.

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)