

FCCS September 28, 2019

“Chiaroscuro”

We are all just walking each other home...
(words by Ram Dass, music by Kate Munger)

Bonus points if you know the definition of Chiaroscuro?

It is an Italian word that means light-dark. The picture on the bulletin cover is an example. In art, it is a technique used by the artist to create mystery- the illusion that part of the story is veiled or in shadow.

In music Chiaroscuro refers to a classical Italian singing technique in which a brilliant sound referred to as squillo is coupled with a dark timbre called scuro. The overall sound is often perceived as having great depth or warmth. It is a technique commonly employed in opera.

Our food for thought both this week and last refer to the idea that no one is one dimensional:

“In each of us lie good and bad, light and dark, art and pain, choice and regret, cruelty and sacrifice. We’re each of us our own chiaroscuro, our own bit of illusion fighting to emerge into something solid, something real. We’ve got to forgive ourselves that. I must remember to forgive myself. Because there is a lot of grey to work with. No one can live in the light all the time.” — Libba Bray

A lot of grey to work with; that is a marvelous concept, a life-saving concept in fact, not a biblical concept. Scripture tends to lean heavily on the metaphors of black and white. This morning’s text is a pretty classic example of good and bad, light and dark. If you identify with Lazarus, this is a very gratifying story; in the end the rich get what they deserve. If we can identify in any way with the rich man’s, the prognosis is pretty dire.

There is a lot of role reversal going on here; Lazarus covets a scrap from the rich man’s table, the rich man will forever covet just a drop of water from Lazarus to cool his burning tongue.

The poor man once unnoticed, is now fixed forever in the rich man’s vision. Where there was a gate that could have been open but separated the two men in life, now there is a chasm that neither are able to traverse.

Let's take our Chiaroscuro, our black-white parable and add in some grey. We are going to do that by using a contemporary parallel.

This week I became aware of a letter that had been sent both to Cathy Capriolla our City Manager, and Kathy King Director of Sonoma Overnight Support the main venue for services to the homeless folks in our Valley.

The letter pointed out that this is Vintage Festival weekend in Sonoma, a weekend designed to portray our city as a bucolic paradise. The letter also pointed out that in the days leading up to the festival and even during the festival itself there were homeless people in the plaza.

There were open containers of liquor being consumed in public and the benches surrounding the Italian fountain and rose garden where "full of people drinking surrounded by their belongings. Some of whom are even sleeping in the amphitheater at night.

The, the letter went on to say that this "is not inviting for local families and looks horrible for our visitors." Worse, it is a problem that is ultimately bound to have an impact on tourism and therefore the revenue the city.

Now, it is easy to create a black and white picture here. If we are on the side of the homeless, we might say, where are they supposed to go in a city that does not provide adequate year-round shelter? We might wonder how is it fare for one group of people to wander around the plaza with full wine glasses, while it is reprehensible for others to been seen drinking mid-day?

If, however, we see this situation from the perspective of this taxpaying citizen; we might be able to agree that there has been an uptick of people hanging out on the plaza and that it could indeed have some long-term adverse-affects.

Now let's take out our grey chalk...

Brene Brown researcher/storyteller specializing in what she calls the power of vulnerability and whole hearted living. She invites to answer this question; how many of us believe that the people in our lives are doing the best they can?

How many would say that is not true.

Brown's research shows that about 50 percent of people believe that others are doing the best they can and the other 50 percent do not.

She has found that the people who she has come to see as the most compassionate and resilient have two things in common, 1) they set really good boundaries for themselves and others. 2) they assume others have positive intentions.

She believes that most of us do not know how to set clear boundaries and when we feel like our boundaries are not being respected, we assume the worst about others. We get mad at homeless people for sleeping in the park or pissed off at Lazarus begging for food in our respectable neighborhoods. When we think this way it becomes easy to believe that 'those' people are actively trying to upset or disappoint us.

What Brown calls "Daring Leaders," what we might call followers of the Way-these people work from the assumption that others are doing the best they can, at least they are doing the best they can right now. The real irony is that believing people are doing the best they can or at least the best they can makes our lives better. We'll come back to that thought.

I want to invite you to think of someone who kinda drives you crazy, and it can't be the president that is too easy. It has to be someone close to you; like a co-worker, or family member. This is someone who brings up resentment and disappointment for you on a regular basis- do you have them in your mind's eye?

Good, now imagine that person is doing the very best they can. How might that change the way you feel about that person?

I had a huge realization during last week, I realized that most of my problems with other people come from my expectations that they should be more like me. They should do things the way I do them and if they don't, I'm gonna get mad about it. But, if I really stop to think about that- I'm not at all interested in a world of people look, or think, or act just like I do- in fact that would be kinda scary.

Brene Brown says that the ability to see that others are doing their best, takes a commitment to stop respecting and evaluating people based solely on what we think they should accomplish, and start respecting them for who they are and holding them accountable for what they are actually doing, not just how we feel about what they are doing.

When we can see that others are doing their best, we can begin to lighten up on ourselves when we are overwhelmed or struggling; learning to say, 'right now, I am doing the very best I can'.

The chasms between heaven and hell are really of our own making, aren't they? There is one lesson from this passage (Luke 16:19-31) we would do well not to overlook, it is there in the last line of the text; Abraham said to the rich man, "If (your brothers) do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

Remember that old joke about a fella stuck on his rooftop in a flood. He was praying to God for help.

Soon a man in a rowboat came by and the fella shouted to the man on the roof, "Jump in, I can save you." The stranded fella shouted back, "No, it's OK, I'm praying to God and God is going to save me." So, the rowboat went on.

Then a motorboat came by. "The fella in the motorboat shouted, "Jump in, I can save you." To this the stranded man said, "No thanks, I'm praying to God and God is going to save me. I have faith." So, the motorboat went on.

Then a helicopter came by and the pilot shouted down, "Grab this rope and I will lift you to safety. "To this the stranded man again replied, "No thanks, I'm praying to God and God is going to save me. I have faith" So, the helicopter reluctantly flew away.

Soon the water rose above the rooftop and the man drowned. He went to Heaven. He finally got his chance to discuss this whole situation with God, at which point he exclaimed, "I had faith but you didn't save me. I don't understand why!"

To this God replied, "I sent a rowboat, a motorboat, and a helicopter, what more did you expect?"

Friends, perhaps it is time to put our faith in one another.

Sing: We are all just doing the best we can. Amen