

December 3 – First Sunday in Advent

Bah Humbug!

Isaiah 9:2-7 Matthew 20:1, 14-16 (parable of workers in the vineyard)

When we think about the story, “A Christmas Carol” we tend to focus most of our attention on the ghost of Jacob Marley and the three Spirits who come after him. They add such a delightful air to the account. However, this story is really about Scrooge and his transformation or redemption. We need to begin by asking, who is Scrooge at the beginning of the tale? He is definitely an unhappy, miserly curmudgeon. Here are a few phrases Dickens uses to describe him as the story opens.

*“But he was a tight-fisted hand at the grind-stone Scrooge! A squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire, secret, and self-contained. The cold within him froze his old features, nipped his pointed nose...He carried his own low temperature always about with him...“No warmth could warm him, no wintry weather chill him. No wind that blew was bitterer than he.”*

I think we get the picture. What made Scrooge this way? Scrooge believed in a world where everything can be weighed, measured and counted. Scrooge isn't completely unfeeling. He certainly cares about money. When you stare continually at a spreadsheet making sure there is always a positive balance at the end of the day, it gives you a peculiar view of life. When prosperity becomes the only measure of a godly life, the poor are vilified, the less fortunate are assumed to be lazy, greedy, and apathetic. There is no compassion.

For Scrooge, everything seems quantifiable. He subscribes to the “You reap what you sow” philosophy. If this is the sole foundation for our understanding of God, we run the risk of understanding salvation as a reward for ending life “in the black.”

Jesus talks about this kind of attitude in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus as found in Luke, chapter 16. It is assumed that the rich man had noticed Lazarus lying at his door, probably walked over or around him and never gave him a thought. After all, he was poor. He deserved what he got. Too bad he wasn't blessed like the one with wealth. Both died and we find the situation reversed. Lazarus is in paradise and the rich man in torment. In life the rich man could not see the poor man's value as a child of

God. This parable is not about the afterlife or reaping what you sow or economics or the sting of guilt; rather it offers a conviction to open our eyes to the value of each and every life. The great chasm across which the rich man cannot travel is ignorance. In a way, Marley represents the rich man in Jesus' parable, affirming that you could reap what you sow, but warning Scrooge that he has been sowing the wrong kind of seed.

When Scrooge is challenged to see things differently from his calculating vision of life he shouts "Bah Humbug." Now, when we see Scrooge-like attitudes we think that maybe we should shout "Bah humbug" at their value system because they should have known better.

I am going to give you three Scrooge-like scenarios. After each, I want you to shout, "Bah Humbug." There was the pharmaceutical company that raised the price of Epi Pens by 600% because they were the sole providers of the lifesaving drug and could make a huge profit. What do we say? "Bah Humbug!"

Stores are now opening on Thanksgiving Day with Black Friday sales. K mart opened at 6 am Thanksgiving. To those who put profit above time with family we say, "Bah Humbug!"

Or a story from last Christmas about a new owner of an apartment building that evicted the tenants days before Christmas so they could be resold as luxury condos at the first of the year. We say, "Bah Humbug."

Whenever we believe that money buys security or happiness, especially at the expense of others, we call it Scrooge-like. The hard question to ask is, "Where do I see a little of Scrooge in me?" If your world is only what can be weighed and measured, Advent's message makes too little sense for a merry investment. If the *foundation* of your relationship with God is "you reap what you sow," you are a bit Scrooge-like.

We understand that the story is about the redemption of Scrooge when his nephew Fred arrives at his office and asks Scrooge to dine with him at Christmas. To which we hear, "Bah humbug." Fred's reply to Christmas being a humbug is to share a world view that isn't about ledgers and buying and selling and reaping what you sow. He ends, "though it has never put a scrap of gold or silver in my pocket, I believe that it has done me good and will do me good; and I say, God Bless it!" Although Scrooge doesn't realize it, Fred's view of Christmas and life will be the journey of learning Scrooge will

be undergoing through the visits of the various ghosts and spirits. He is to learn that life isn't about gaining wealth and prosperity. He will learn that the Christmas season celebrates that all are united as one body in the hope of shared kindness and charity.

Jesus shared another parable about workers in the vineyard that proclaims, in some ways, this world view. If it makes little sense you might have some Scrooge-like issues. After all it almost seems foolish to say "yes" to the landowner so early in the day if you are going to get the same amount of money for one hour's work. What Scrooge had to learn, what we need to remember, is that God doesn't always play by the rules we expect. God's grace cannot be earned. It is a gift. The mystery of the parable is that everyone receives the agreed-upon wage. The wage is not the reward; rather the reward is the work itself.

In the story, we begin to see Scrooge struggling to hold on to his value system. Marley comes to say that Scrooge has been sowing the wrong kind of seed. The value system he and Scrooge had so prized was nothing more than chains that bound him, and now causes him to wander eternally without peace. Scrooge tries to push back complimenting Marley on having been such a good man of business.

"Business! Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence were all my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!"

Scrooge and sometimes we as well, have to be reminded that God's gift of grace and peace comes to us when we value the things of God. Jesus' parable of the vineyard is shocking to our modern economic ears. That is the thing about God's grace. It is an amazing gift when it is offered to you, but when it is granted to someone you don't think deserves it, it is the toughest pill in all of creation to swallow. If we are to reap what we sow, God's grace would be out of reach. It cannot be earned.

Marley comes to tell Scrooge his love of money is binding him to the past. He says that the path Scrooge is on will lead to an eternity of imprisonment and lack of peace. Today we lit our first Advent candle. Our crier reminded us that many are living in harm's way. Their plight is our concern. To find peace, we have to let go of a past that can be weighed and measured and begin to embrace service to God which is also service for others. Love and compassion will break those chains that binds us. Before

he leaves, Marley takes Scrooge to the window where he sees spirits in torment. The misery with them all was, clearly, that they sought to interfere for good, in human matters and had lost the power forever. Scrooge begins to say “Humbug!” but can only mutter a monosyllable, “Hum...” This first intervention of the spirit world causes Scrooge to see, really see, people for perhaps the first time as fellow travelers.

This first part of the story makes us ask where we are bound to outdated worldviews. Where we are not always glad to celebrate God’s economy at the risk of our own. What are our chains? What needs to happen to break our cycle of enslavement? Where do we need to love more and trust more?

Scrooge’s dismissive response, “Bah! Humbug!” perfectly expresses the worldview of Ebenezer Scrooge. Scrooge is an iconic figure who represents stinginess, greed, and generally being in a terrible mood. Even though by the end of the story Ebenezer Scrooge is a changed person, the character remains a strong caricature of everything our Christmas celebrations shouldn’t be. It seems that we can’t accept that he has been redeemed. But maybe there is still hope. After all, if Scrooge can be redeemed, then so can we.

As we move through the season of transformation and redemption of Scrooge may we too be redeemed, for there is a little bit of Scrooge in each of us. *“The miracle has just begun in YOU for the sake of the world... God Bless us Every One!”*