

“Transformation Cannot Begin Without Awareness”
A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of
St. Andrew’s United Church
for Sunday, September 25th, 2016
Scripture Readings: **Amos 6:1a, 4-7** and **Luke 16:19-31**
(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

It probably has been has been thirty years or more since advertisers thought the way to get their point across was through dramatic, upsetting, even bloody and violent ads that speak to the dangers of what they were discussing.

Drinking and driving ads with dramatic crashes and loss; people facing major health concerns but refusing treatment; blackened lungs showing the results of years and years of smoking.

Some people respond to such dramatic images, but usually we need a transformative experience to get us to change our ways. The health suffering of others may get us pondering life, but the health challenges that we may face ourselves have a greater impact. Images of what others have faced can stop us in our tracks, but an upset in our own lives or family can alter the future forever.

Life is like that – our understanding of expectations and experiences are much more vivid when we have been in the midst of the event.

Today’s readings speak to that reality. A rich man, known as such for he is dressed in purple (beware those of you dressed in purple this morning), has an experience of insight for he has ignored a beggar named Lazarus, but sees a vision where the beggar ends up in heaven, while the rich man after death ends up in hell.

He wants his family to be told that what awaits them is not pleasant unless they change their ways, but his request is rebuked.

After all, they have the law and the prophets, and all of that tradition spoke about justice and fairness and understanding and care, so why would they change if someone appears to them from the dead?

In simple terms, we often think life is about having the right information in order to make a decision, but this story reminds us that often life is about having the right heart, or attitude, in order to make the right decision.

And having, or finding, the right heart is not about knowledge as much as it is about awareness – awareness of others and awareness about one’s own being.

As a Buddhist teacher says, when asked for the distinction between “right awareness” and “wrong awareness,” offers these thoughts:

“Don’t ask what is right awareness and wrong awareness. Simply ask what is awareness... Awareness is simple, very innocent. Everyone has it, so it is not a question of achievement. You already

have it..... When you see the sunset, are you not aware? When you see a rose flower, are you not aware? You are aware of the beautiful sunset, you are aware of the beautiful rose, all that is needed is that you become aware of your awareness too.”

Become aware of your awareness?

Surely what is meant is that we take time to be clear to ourselves what is valuable, special, unique, important, and we will not err in our actions if we keep our values and attitudes front and centre in what we do and say.

Awareness is not so much being non-judgmental (as if we never make judgments or assessments about life situations or people – helpful or not, etc.

Awareness is seeing others for who they are and want to be. When you go through the checkout line at the grocery store, do we see a person in all of their wholeness and personal challenges, or do we see someone there to get us through the line as quickly as possible?

The rich man in Jesus’ story never took time to get to know Lazarus (or possibly he never took time to get to know many people he encountered in his life for who they were) – he only saw others for how they might impact, or not impact, his own life.

It is credited to the Roman Philosopher Seneca to be one of the first to speak about self-awareness: “For a person who is not aware that he is doing anything wrong has no desire to be put right.”

In a variety of situations and opportunities, being self-aware can be the main ingredient that helps us to maximize our own abilities, and be effective at communicating with and understanding others.

Anthony K. Tjan, writing in the Harvard Business Review a few years ago, suggests (and please note, there is no reference to a current Presidential candidate in the sixth word directly, though that candidate may learn from the advice being given or observations being made in this article):

There is one quality that trumps all, evident in virtually every great entrepreneur, manager, and leader. That quality is self-awareness. The best thing leaders can do to improve their effectiveness is to become more aware of what motivates them and their decision making.

It is not an example of what we have learned, or how much we have studied. The scriptures today show that the rich man had little insight until reality was up front and personal with him, and only then did he really understand how he was expected to live and to act in this world.

So often I have heard that if only we had more knowledge or more understanding, we would change our ways. I suggest to you that maybe we need more awareness of what we have to offer, and what the needs of others are in our community, in order to plan ahead.

Awareness of others is the first step to personal and community transformation. In involves opening our eyes and our hearts, in Christ’s way.