

As many of you know, I like to use art in my sermons and I share pieces of art to be kind of starters for reflection upon what is going on in a text or what is going on in our life. And today is no different except that I have to say that I'm not incredibly taken by the piece of art I'm sharing with you. It's by Maurizio Cattelan. It was done in 2016. It's called America and it's a picture of a sculpture which is a working toilet made entirely of 24-karat gold, "America." Cattelan did this as an installation at the Guggenheim in 2016. And then more recently it was displayed in England at Blenheim Palace. And someone made the good decision to steal it.

It was a working toilet. People would actually – when it was in the Guggenheim, they would wait an hour and a half to use America. Now think for a moment, if you will, the kind of foresight you need to have about your own body to be able to wait for an hour and a half so that you, when you get to your turn, are able to actually produce. And yet, people waited an hour and a half to use America, to use a golden toilet.

Now I raise this for you because I actually think this makes an incredibly interesting point about the way we talk about values today. Because I know that there is hidden in here a pretty profound point, which is that our goals in our lives have become a bit crass and there is this incredible inequality in this country between rich and poor. But the way this message was delivered is a means that I'm finding a little bit problematic. In fact, maybe a lot problematic. Because I see America as an elaborate example of something that commentators call virtue signaling, which is a kind of discourse in which you justify yourself by holding to a correct opinion that you can use to judge others.

So the perfect example of virtue signaling, you see this often in social media, on Facebook, or in Instagram or Twitter, virtue signaling begins when someone will say something like, "You know, I am no longer going to eat meat because it's bad for the environment and no good for me, and the cows don't seem to benefit from it." And then the next post would be someone who writes, "You eat meat? I'm a vegetarian. I have been a vegetarian for 20 years. I haven't eaten meat or any kind of flesh because of the environment, and because of my body and because I think we need to learn to live a little bit differently."

And then another post will come in and say, "You eat dairy? You eat eggs, and butter and cheese? I am a vegan. I haven't touched anything like that for many years because of the environment because it does the cows no good, because of this and that." And then finally, the last one is, "You cook your food? I am a raw vegan. How barbaric can you be? You're stealing nutrients away from those vegetables."

Virtue signaling has this kind of way of thinking and acting and it's a way of creating a kind of moral ecology. It's a way of kind of creating this way in which we relate to each other. And it primarily does that by judging another person. It judges a group of people. It creates kind of these zones of exclusion in which people justify themselves and kind of promote their good character.

So, virtue signaling is one of those moments in which we create in our society yet another silo and echo chamber because it quickly creates these communities in which everybody

agrees and they all reinforce each other in thinking of themselves as good people. Now, I think Maurizio Cattelan's piece is a perfect piece of virtue signaling because it created this kind of exclusive club of people who are in the know, who would go to this and nobody was actually changed and no good was actually done by the use of that toilet. There is no poor people who benefited from the fact that Cattelan made this piece.

In fact, the only person who truly benefited was Cattelan himself who made a name for himself as an artist. And of all the things that could have happened in our society, learning to shame each other better is something that I don't think we need more lessons in doing. It kind of creates these zones of exclusion in which we all gather in places where we agree and we vilify the other.

So I use this art piece because I think that one of the temptations we have faced when we look at today's gospel and read the parable of Lazarus and the rich man, the temptation we face is actually to fall into the kind of rationalization or even virtue signaling. And so, we read about the rich man who is living in complete opulence who lives – has feasts every day and we say, "Well, I'm not like that. I was born poor," or, "My family had to struggle," or "I don't own a gold toilet," or maybe to draw from our reading from Amos, we don't lie on beds of ivory. We always seem to rationalize ourselves and say, "Well, I am not part of this parable because I'm not the rich man."

Or we tend to say that Lazarus – the other edge and the other end of this incredible dichotomy in the parable, the incredible characters in the parable, we say that Lazarus was truly a deserving person. He was truly a poor person when we know that we cannot trust all of the poor. We know that many of them are trying to take advantage of us. Those people that are asking for donations at the corner of Woodward and Maple, they are working for other people. They're professional beggars.

In all of these ways, we tend to protect ourselves or maybe accuse others when we encounter today's parable of the rich man and Lazarus. And I don't think Jesus was interested in any kind of virtue signaling when He told this parable. I don't think Jesus was intending to use this parable to shame anybody. I think Jesus was telling a parable which is a kind of story in order to highlight what it means to live in such a way that there's a kind of weighing of all that we do on the scales of eternity.

Because in the end, this is a parable about resurrection. It's about the afterlife. It's about this moment in which Jesus speaks about Lazarus being in the bosom of Abraham and the rich man being in torment and the two trying to make a connection across a great chasm. And of course, just that description alone, we should know that we are talking about, not a heaven that you and I would set our hopes on, but a kind of image of heaven that we are to use to maybe think more powerfully about ourselves and our possessions and our lives.

So if this is a parable about heaven, what is Jesus trying to say? I want to suggest that everything pivots in this parable on the person of Lazarus. Lazarus is lying at the gate of the rich man's house which was how you got support in those days. You didn't have welfare. You didn't have a government. You would either go to the temple or synagogue or you'd go to a wealthy person's house and you would lay out and beg.

But Lazarus is not even a beggar. The Greek that is used for Lazarus is that he is a Ftchós. He's just poor. He has lost everything. But the only thing that Lazarus has is the one thing that he cannot lose, which is his identity as a child of Abraham. He is a Jew and having lost everything, all he has left is his identity which is the way in which he will receive a promise of resurrection.

The rich man, on the other hand, has completely forgotten his identity. The fact that he is dressed so sumptuously is a signal to the people who would hear this parable that this rich man was dressing like royalty or like a priest. He was acting as if he was on his own. And the fact that the rich man was feasting everyday meant that he had lost a sense of the time and seasons, the rituals that would be used to actually create his identity as a Jew.

And the second thing to notice about Lazarus is that the name Lazarus is actually from the Hebrew Eleazar which means God helps. So Lazarus lying at the gate of the rich man's house, his very name suggests that he will not be forgotten by God, that he will be cared for even if everybody else forgets him. And the rich man, we never learn his name because his identity has become so diffused that he has all but disappeared.

Now I want to stress, this is an image of the afterlife that is not the same as the resurrection you and I hope for. Because in the resurrection you and I hope for, compassion and forgiveness will not be in scarcity. Compassion and forgiveness will not be a scarce commodity. Jesus will reconcile all things because Jesus's love and His life are more powerful than what can ever oppose it.

But there is a teaching in this parable which is that the decisions we make about ourselves have a kind of resonance that stretch far beyond the here and now. Because the rich man steps away from his identity and he loses not only the reward that's waiting for him in heaven, but he loses that energy and joy that comes when we actually begin to experience resurrection now. Because thanks be to Jesus Christ, the resurrected life isn't simply something waiting for us, it's something that begins here and now.

When we learn to forgive, when we have been hurt, we have experienced the resurrection. When we begin to learn to heal after we have been wounded and to recover, after we have suffered from disease, that is a moment of resurrection. And when we learn to be generous with all of our possessions, we begin to live out the birthright God gave us in resurrection.

Ninety-one years ago, the founders of Christ Church Cranbrook began to do something bold with what they had. They built a church with a massive gift of their personal fortune. George Booth made it his life's ambition to die penniless. And he did save for a couple of insurance policies that paid up and kept his family going. He gave it all away because he had this belief in the future, a belief in resurrection, one might say.

And the first thing that he gave to this church is the tapestry that's on the cover of your bulletin today. This was a tapestry done by Edward Burne-Jones in 1901 to 1902 and it's of David giving the plans of the temple to Solomon because it has been revealed to David that

because of all of his bloodshed he had to give up his life's ambition to build the temple for God and to give it to Solomon.

And Booth bought this beautiful tapestry. And then when they laid the foundation of the cornerstone for this church, they hung that tapestry in the back of the tent so that they could have a kind of wonderful, theological construct for the gift that they were making when they gave this church. Now that gift of generosity was not something that was intended to shame anybody, but it was given out of the hope that you and I would find ourselves in the same position of generating generosity for others. And that that would be our way of claiming the future that they imagined, the resurrection that begins now.

And you and I, through the past several years together have found our way forward every day. Think of the mouths that were fed. Think of the people who were picked up off of the street. Think of all the people who were welcomed, all the people who were changed because of the gift of this church. And truly you can see why the Booth's, in their wisdom, understood that they had to build the church because churches are engines of generosity. And so instead of spending their money on golden toilets, they spent their money on beautiful tapestries and on a beautiful church so that we might be transformed.

And the question you and I have to wrestle with today is, what does it mean for us to maintain that birthright in resurrection that we have been given through Jesus Christ? What does it mean for us to hold fast to our identity as Christians to be transformed in our own lives, and rather than shaming others to create a community that welcomes all and that in which all are transformed and encouraged to new life? What does resurrection look like for you in this here and now?

Amen.

[End of Recording]