

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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9/30/07

Luke 16:19-31 (NRSV)

"There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. [20] And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, [21] who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. [22] The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. [23] In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. [24] He called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.' [25] But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. [26] Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.' [27] He said, 'Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house-- [28] for I have five brothers--that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.' [29] Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.' [30] He said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' [31] He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.' "

AFFLICTING THE COMFORTABLE

Last week we struggled with a passage that was hard to understand. This week we struggle with a passage that is all too easy to understand. I think it was Mark Twain who once said something like, "It's not what I don't understand about the Bible that bothers me. It's what I do understand!"

Today's passage falls into that category.

Jesus told this story in an attempt to convict the religious leaders of their sin. In Luke 16:14-15 we read that the religious leaders were lovers of money. Now they wouldn't admit to any of this. According to Jesus they had all sorts

of ways to rationalize their behavior, all sorts of ways to justify their behavior in the sight of others, but they couldn't fool God. God knew what was in their hearts. God knew what they really valued, and it broke God's heart to think that his leaders were so shallow.

I'm sorry, but much of what passes for religion these days is a thinly veiled desire to line the pockets of the wealthy at the expense of the poor. This so called prosperity theology, the idea that the faithful are rewarded with riches is the greatest heresy to come into the church in recent memory. And I think it breaks God's heart today that religious leaders are distorting the Bible in this way. In order to be successful religious leaders have often been telling people what they want to hear instead of what they need to hear.

When we discussed this passage in Bible study someone said, "Well, I guess this week you won't be comforting the afflicted. You'll be afflicting the comfortable." And she was right. This story is graphic and disturbing, and it makes all of us uncomfortable.

SINS OF OMISSION

What makes this parable especially uncomfortable is that it speaks not only about sins of commission but also about sins of omission. It doesn't speak about the bad things that we do but about the good things that we fail to do.

You see the rich man in our parable for today didn't do anything wrong. He just liked the finer things of life. He liked nice clothes and good food. And he ignored the poor beggar named Lazarus who resided just outside of his gated residence. Maybe he thought that he was doing the poor man a favor by letting him stay outside his house. It's more than we do for some of the beggars in our community.

We might be able to (by and large) avoid the gross sins of life. We might even be able to think of ourselves as fine, upstanding Christians when comparing ourselves to those who have committed horrible crimes. But, all of us have left undone those things that we should have done. All of us have, in one way or another ignored the beggar at the gate.

And so, this morning even though the air conditioning is working perfectly it's starting to get a bit warm in here. We realize that it's our feet that are being held to the fire, and we don't like it one little bit. This story is designed to eliminate all wiggle room when it comes to our financial responsibility to the poor.

I don't know about you, but that makes me very uncomfortable. I live very well. I enjoy my life. And yet I know that there are those just outside the gate who don't live so well. And so like the religious leaders of old I make my excuses. I ask things like, "How can I know that what I give is really going to those who need it? Maybe those poor people are too lazy to work."

Those are legitimate concerns. And we should strive to make sure that our benevolent giving is responsible and effective. But, those concerns shouldn't be used, as they often are, as an excuse to do nothing. From the biblical perspective, doing nothing is not an option. Not only will we be judged by how we treat the least among us; we will also be separated from God if we do not show compassion on the broken ones who come into our life.

THE CONTRAST

Today's story makes that painfully clear. The rich man had a wonderful life, a big gated home and every night was a party. And the poor beggar at his gate had a terrible life. He was covered with sores, and his only "friends" were the stray dogs who licked his wounds. It wasn't a surprise when the poor beggar died.

But, what was a surprise was that the rich man died on the very same day. Who knows, maybe he clogged his arteries with too many steak dinners. Whatever the reason those who had been so far apart in life were now exactly equal in death. One scholar used a colorful phrase to describe this time. He called it the "moment of dreadful equity."

Oh, I suspect the rich man had a better funeral, and the poor beggar was given a hasty burial in a pauper's grave ... if he received that much. But, at the moment of death neither one was above the other.

But, after they died, Jesus tells us that the tables were turned. The rich man who lived such a pleasurable life found himself in Hades, and the temperature was uncomfortably high. In contrast, the poor man named Lazarus was in a much cooler place beside the founder of the Jewish faith, Father Abraham. He was far away from that place where the rich man was located. We assume that place was heaven.

But, despite being far away the rich man could see Lazarus. Isn't it odd? All those years Lazarus lived outside the rich man's gate, and he acted like he couldn't see him at all.

But, now that the rich man is in Hades and Lazarus is in heaven, the rich man can see the poor man clearly. And not only that, it seems that the rich man noticed the beggar at his gate after all, for he calls his name. The rich man calls out to Father Abraham on the other side of the great divide, "... send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames."

Several years ago someone wrote an interpretation of the Bible based upon southern culture called the Cotton Patch Bible. They have the rich man shouting, "Oh Father Abraham, send me my water boy. Water boy! Quick! I'm just about to perish down here. I need a drink of water. That old rich guy had always hollered for his water boy: Boy, bring me this! Boy bring me that! Get away boy! Come here boy!"

I think that really helps us get at what is going on here. The rich man is in hell, but he's still acting like he's the one in charge.

Father Abraham has to tell him that what he asks is impossible. Number one, the rich man isn't in charge of anything any more. In the afterlife the tables have been turned. He's in misery while Lazarus is comforted. And number two, there's a great chasm, a great gulf between Lazarus and the rich man that is impossible to cross.

HEAVENLY STORY WITH AN EARTHLY MEANING

For the past two weeks I've been telling you that a parable is an "earthly story with a heavenly meaning." Today, I want to flip that on its head. I

think this is a “heavenly story with an earthly meaning.” The point of Jesus’ story is not to give us a detailed analysis of heaven and hell. It is a wakeup call for those of us who are so concerned about our own comfort that we are oblivious to the needs of others.

God is not our “water boy” whose sole purpose is to give us our heart’s desire. With all due respect to the praise and worship song that we sometimes use, the awesome God is not “our” God. God is a righteous God. God has a hunger and a thirst for justice and mercy. God is above us and beyond us.

And God doesn’t want us to be so “heavenly minded” that we’re of no earthly good. The road to heaven begins right here and now in the way that we treat the needy person at the gate to our home.

Again, I need to warn you about being too literal when it comes to your interpretation of this passage. Don’t just think of those who beg on the street when you think about who might be the Lazarus in your life. There are a variety of broken people who come into your life each day who can be ministered to in the name of Jesus Christ. And we need to be attuned to the fact that God just may be working through the lives of nameless people in forgotten places.

I think it’s interesting that in our parable for today the poor man has a name, Lazarus. But, the rich man is not named. He’s just referred to as the rich man who is a clothes horse. That’s just the opposite of how it works in our world. We know the rich man’s name or the rich woman’s name. We even used to have a TV program called lifestyles of the rich and famous.

But, to my knowledge we’ve never had a program called lifestyles of the down and out. We don’t know the names of the poor and broken people. But, in this story we learn that God knows, and God cares. And because God cares, we should care too.

WHY DIDN’T THEY LISTEN?

For the rich man, it’s too late. The chasm between heaven and Hades is just too great. But, in what seems like the only selfless thing he’s ever done in his

life, the rich man asks for mercy for his family. He says, “Send someone to warn my brothers so they won’t end up like me.”

To that Father Abraham replies, “They’ve got Moses and the prophets. Let them listen to them.” And the rich man replies, “They’re hard headed like me. Maybe if someone comes back from the dead, then they’ll listen.”

And Abraham replies, “If they won’t listen to God’s word as delivered by Moses and the prophets, then even if someone comes back from the dead, they won’t listen.”

Someone at the Bible study objected to that statement. She said, “If somebody came back from the dead, I’d listen.” And maybe she would. But, I couldn’t help but think of several times in the Bible when somebody did come back from the dead, and it didn’t create faith in the religious leaders.

First there was another man named Lazarus whom Jesus raised from the dead. Do you remember how the religious leaders responded to that miracle? They plotted to kill Jesus because this miracle would make him too popular with the crowds. And how the religious leaders respond after the resurrection of Jesus? They paid the Roman guards to say that the disciples of Jesus had come and stolen the body from the grave.

No amount of preaching or proof was enough when a people had already made up their minds. They had ears, but they were deaf to the message. They had eyes, but they could not see.

We wonder why the leaders of Jesus’ day just didn’t get it ... why they didn’t listen. But, we would do well to wonder the same thing about ourselves. Why don’t we get it? Why don’t we listen? Where are the poor of the world and how do we treat them? Might we too be blind to the person in need, a person that might be as close as our own gate?

THE POOR AT OUR GATES

We might not think of ourselves as rich, but most of us are wealthy when measured over against those folks who live just outside the gates of our country. Last year on a cruise Carrollyn and I had the opportunity to see the

Mayan ruins in Mexico. That was great, but equally impressive and disturbing was the poverty of the people in that area. Their homes didn't even have windows or doors.

Their schools were like open air pavilions, and I learned that they had to have several sessions in order for everyone to attend. The contrast between the air conditioned luxury of our chartered bus and their way of life made me think about passages like this. The guide told us that tourism helped support the whole area so I didn't feel too bad about going. But, still the big contrast between how I lived and how they lived made me think.

Lately people have been talking with some alarm about the steady flow of immigrants into our country. Actually, it's nothing new. Most of us can trace our roots to some migration from the old country. There were the Scots and the English and the Irish and the Poles and the Germans and ... well you name it.

Our forefathers and mothers by and large weren't wealthy people. In fact they were quite poor. But, in this country they found opportunity.

Now people are coming from different parts of the world. They have an unfamiliar accent and a different culture, but they have the same dream. They are those poor, huddled masses who long for a bit of food from the table. They, like Lazarus want a better life. I wonder if this passage doesn't say something about what our attitude and actions should be toward the alien in our midst.

In the Bible we have a lot of passages that say we shouldn't harvest everything but instead we should leave something so that the poor and the aliens might eat and be filled.

Why were God's people commanded to act in this way? They were commanded to be compassionate toward the poor because they remembered a time when they were foreigners in the land of Egypt. They remembered a time when their people didn't have enough to eat. And if it weren't for the grace of God they would be in the same situation. God heard their cries and delivered them.

Could that say something about what our attitude should be toward the poorer nations of the world? Should all of our decisions be based upon our own national interest or should we have a broader, more compassionate view of the world?

This parable seems to suggest the broad view. This parable seems to suggest that it's important to build bridges to people of all walks of life instead creating a chasm of despair.

IT'S NOT TOO LATE FOR US

And here's the good news. It's not too late for us. We can bridge that chasm in this life. But, in the life to come it will be too late.

Barbara Brown Taylor wrote that one of the difficulties of this passage is that we don't identify with anyone in the parable. Most of us are not filthy rich, and most of us are not desperately poor. But, maybe there is someone with whom we can identify in the parable. Maybe we're like the brothers that the rich man wants to save with a message of warning.

For him it's too late. But, for us it's not too late.

We still have the opportunity to bridge the chasms that divide us. We still have an opportunity to reach out to those who are broken in some way. We still have an opportunity to make a difference. But, in the life to come it will be too late.

And when we make a connection with the broken of this world we'll find that we have brothers and sisters whom we didn't know. When we make that connection with the broken person at our gate it is the first step toward a greater understanding of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

In Matthew's gospel we learn that when we serve the person in need we may even find the presence of Christ. Most of you know the passage very well. Jesus said, "I was hungry and you fed me. I was a prisoner and you visited me. I was a stranger and you welcomed me." When did that happen? Whenever we do something for one of the least and the lost we have done it

for Jesus. We have welcomed the presence of God into our lives and reduced the chasm between heaven and hell.

ETHICS, NOT THEOLOGY

If you want to know the heart of God when it comes to heaven and hell, I'm not sure that this is the best passage to use. I've heard people use this passage to graphically describe the torments of hell and act as if this is how it will be for those who have bad theology, those who have not prayed the prayer and named the name of Jesus. Sometimes they seemed to take delight in the fact that their theological rivals would soon meet a fiery end!

But, this passage was never meant to be used in that way. This passage is not about theology. It's about ethics.

The rich man had good theology, at least what passed for good theology in his day. The theologians of his time thought that if you were rich God had blessed you and approved of you. And if you were poor God was punishing you for some terrible sin.

Though people might not say that out loud today, that's what a lot of people still believe. They want to pray the prayer of Jabez over and over again, and get what they want because their theology is orthodox. But, orthodox theology does not always lead to righteous action.

The Bible is clear on this. When all is said and done salvation does not consist of orthodox theology alone. Salvation comes to those who "do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with their God". (Micah 6:8) Salvation comes to those who love the Lord their God and their neighbor as themselves. All the burnt offerings in the world and all the altar calls in the world and all the revivals in the world will not make a bit of difference unless we are a compassionate people.

The important point that must not be missed in this story is that the rich man sent himself to hell with his lack of compassion. The rich man created a chasm between himself and God when he created a chasm between himself and the poor.

THE HEART OF GOD

God does not wish for any of us to destroy ourselves in this way. God does not want our hearts to be hardened by a lack of compassion and love. God does not want any of us to end up in a hell of our own creation.

The best passage to describe the heart of God is the one in which Jesus is about to enter Jerusalem for the last time. He knows that he will be killed by people he loves. He knows that even after his resurrection there will be many who will not believe. And Jesus is greatly disturbed by their lack of faith.

Jesus cries out,

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” Luke 13:34 (NRSV)

The question for us this morning is this, “Are we willing to be gathered under the wings of grace? Are we willing to love God and neighbor? Are we willing to start building bridges instead of making the chasm bigger?”

It’s not just one decision that we make. It is a series of decisions that we make each and every day. And when we come to the end of our days, who we are and whose we are and where we are is determined by those actions.

The message for today, the message for all of us is this: it’s not too late. Let’s take the first step in that journey of compassion and love. It’s the first step that leads to salvation.

Amen.