

Luke 16:19-31

¹⁹There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. ²²The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham.

The rich man also died and was buried. ²³In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴He 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.' ²⁵But 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.

²⁶Besides 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.' ²⁷He said, 'Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house — ²⁸for I have five brothers — that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.' ²⁹Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.' ³⁰He said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' ³¹He 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.'"

Luke 16:19-31, 2016

Abraham said,

“They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.”

This simple statement speaks volumes about the central point of this text.

1. God’s Word is spoken to the people by Moses and the prophets
2. In those five brothers we can see ourselves, we are them and we need to transform our attitude toward the Word of God.

So, this parable, unlike the parable from last week, is about something other than money.

It is about our relationship with God and God’s Word.

This rich man’s fate is not determined by his money bags, but by his relationship to the Word.

In the opening statement Jesus says, “There was a rich man...” and that alone is an indicator that there is something wrong

Not that it is bad or godless to be rich, or that being poor is somehow a sign of goodness or godliness,

BUT

That it is a terrible thing if the only thing that can be said about a person is that they were rich.

In light of the context of the parable and both characters, Lazarus and the rich man finding themselves in the afterlife,

think for a moment about the obituary of the person about whom nothing else can be said other than they were rich.

What happened to make this so?

Is the rich man in the parable inherently bad or evil or ungodly by virtue of his inability or unwillingness to share what he has with those in need?

I think we might be a little short sighted if we jump to those conclusions.

You see, the rich man who has evaded Lazarus has also evaded God and God's Word;

the word of Moses and the prophets.

He at this point, along with having become wealthy, has become callous, egotistical, cynical and anxiety ridden, filled with fear.

If he looks at Lazarus there he sees his greatest fear; his fear of becoming Lazarus,

of losing everything he has acquired.

The rich man can't bear to come into close contact with misery and suffering.

He is afraid to smell the poverty because it challenges his life style;

it takes the high gloss off his standard of living.

He is always yearning for security and so avoids having any doubts cast upon him

like those that would come by drawing too close to Lazarus.

So in this wretched life the rich man lives he has every reason to believe he has lost his soul,

and so he evades the very one to whom he is accountable for his soul, God,

and the one who reminds him of his accountability and responsibility, Lazarus.

This parable brings us face to face with the question of whether we despise or evade our brothers and sisters in the community who are our Lazarus.

There are many ways to do that and it isn't always about money.

You can be intellectually rich and look down on the ones who don't quite make that grade.

By evading them, by ignoring them or ridiculing them you can drive them deeper into their misery and the difficulties of life.

You can be rich in love.

You can have spouse, children, family, friends with whom you share, give and receive, love.

How often are you shocked by the suicide of a neighbor, and come to realize that there was a person who broke down under such loveless living in the shadows,

and who I avoided.

Perhaps I contributed to driving them into deeper loneliness out of the fear and uneasiness of their poverty and bitterness.

And it doesn't even have to be one who takes their own life.

I am reminded of one of our neighbors in Merritt Island.

Emerson lived a few doors down on the other side of the street.

He was in his nineties and had lost his wife some years earlier.

He was a grouchy old man, and in fact would try to run over the kids with the nice new Cadillac he always had as he came home from the American Legion hall where he usually had too much to drink, if they were out in the street playing.

In fact he hit the boy next door one time with the side mirror of his car.

But we got to be friends and he especially connected with Laura because they shared a military experience,

and he came to accept me as his pastor because he had no connection with a church.

Emerson lived a colorful life, spoke a colorful language, had strong opinions he didn't mind sharing.

He was a pilot from the age of 13 or 14 when he would borrow planes at the local airport and go for a joy ride.

He did become a pilot in the Army Air Corp and was shot down in WWII.

He was captured at the crash sight by the Germans for whom he still had no use with the exception of one German General who got him repatriated.

And I did hear him speak generously about the German doctor who amputated his arm injured when he was shot down.

He was an entrepreneur, businessman, a boat captain and he loved to party. After his retirement five o'clock rolled around every day.

He could be difficult and yet he had a side to him that cared and loved.

Emerson was a difficult father, grandfather and great-grandfather for the family to deal with. Some of them refused to deal with him.

He lived alone and he was lonely;

hence the trip to the American Legion Hall every day, and the call to our house on occasion.

Emerson died in 2010 at the age of 96. I officiated at his funeral.

Emerson could on one occasion be the rich man in our story, and on another, Lazarus.

People are complex.

There is not one dimension to anyone including the rich man and Lazarus.

It was not riches that brought the rich man to hell, nor was it poverty that brought Lazarus to heaven.

Lazarus' life was different from the rich man's.

He didn't have to face the same temptations. He had time to reflect of eternal things and this time could have driven him to bitterness and cursing.

It could be that in all the time spent meaninglessly at the rich man's gate he could have prayed,

but made no use of it because he was too weary and hopeless.

It is said that affliction may teach one to pray, but it might rather teach one to curse.

When the bible speaks of the "poor" it often means the kind of poverty found in those who live on the fringe of life and society and who are in this sense poor;

the outsider, the outcast, the one who is different, to one who doesn't fit in,

the unaccepted and unloved, the broken and despairing.

You have all been there at some point in your life, when you were utterly poor and helpless and all your security was stripped away,

when you feared losing it all, or maybe had lost everything.

In that moment you discovered by experience that it is precisely in these situations when you cannot rely on things and people,

that the blessing and guarding of God are near.

These are the times when God's promise counts for something.

It is when you have nothing left and can see no way out
that you cast it all on God utterly and absolutely

and let him take care of you.

Laura and I watched a movie the other evening that turned out to
be quite inspirational.

The title was *Facing the Giants*.

The main character is a football coach named Grant, and life
was not going well for him at all.

On one day he found out that he was not able to have children,

and that there was a movement by team parents at the
Christian high school where he coached to get rid of him.

He gets home late that evening, broken and in despair.

He sits down at the kitchen table with his wife and pours
his heart out.

I can't provide you with a decent home.

I can't provide you with a decent car.

I am failing as a coach and I can't give you the
children you want.

What is God doing?

Why is this so hard?

He was up all that night reading scripture, praying, crying.

But in that moment he turned to God's word.

He heard God's promises in that moment of life, and he was transformed, he was changed; his life began to change.

In our parable suddenly Lazarus and the rich man were on the other side.

From their new vantage points Lazarus was permitted to see what he believed,

and the rich man was compelled to see what he did not believe.

The rich man cries out to Father Abraham,

“send Lazarus, send someone from the dead to my brothers, they will listen to him and repent!”

Abraham 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.'

The final point is that you are one of the 5 brothers of the rich man,

brothers of the rich man who like their dead brother does not heed God's word given by Moses and the prophets.

Of course, the statement about the one who comes from the dead points to the one who dies and is resurrected;

it points to Jesus, the word made flesh, who came into the world to dwell among us,

who came to give his life for all.

He is the Word we still have today to see us through the hard times of life.

He is the word spoken through the scriptures and the word received as we gather at his table—the bread and wine,

given to strengthen faith for life, to forgive sins

and give the promise that when you get to heaven there will be no chasm between you and God.

You will be in his very presence for all eternity.

Amen