

Lazarus at the Gate

Sermon by John Strommen on Luke 16:19-31 March 26, 2017

Today we have a story about a very rich man who maybe had more than he needed. Do you think? But sometimes we don't know when to put a lid on it. Kind of like Steve Martin in the movie "The Jerk" when he's leaving his girlfriend and figuring out how much stuff he needs...

("The Jerk" film clip)

OK, if you were walking around your house collecting the things you absolutely need, what would your list be? Go ahead and make a list of the essentials. For most of us, our list will grow according to how much money we have. And if there's a lot of money, there can be serious hazards for the soul.

For instance, let's go to our Bible story today about a rich man and a destitute man named Lazarus. The rich guy has an expensive purple wardrobe, lives an opulent lifestyle, and eats very well.

All we know about Lazarus is that he longed to eat scraps from the table of the rich man, he had sores all over his body that the local dogs licked(yuck!), and that he lay at that gate of the rich man – presumably hoping for some of those scraps, but hoping in vain.

Again this is a brief description of the respective worlds of the rich man and Lazarus. There is no indication of any interaction between the two.

Then the parable simply says that they both died. Lazarus is carried by angels to be with Abraham, while the rich man is simply buried, but then finds himself tormented in Hades, amidst flames and heat.

Now, Hades is not exactly what we would call Hell, but rather was considered the place of the dead where everyone went, awaiting final judgment. In the meantime, everyone was divided up into regions according to their moral state in this life. If this is the case, then it certainly looks like the rich man is in a bad region while Lazarus is looking real good, finding himself to be in the "bosom," or "lap" of Abraham. To be in the bosom of Abraham in the next life was considered the highest state of blissfulness.

So the rich man and Lazarus have changed positions, haven't they? The rich man can see Lazarus with Abraham, so he calls out to Abraham, begging him to send Lazarus over to him, dip his finger in cool water and touch it to the rich man's tongue.

Perhaps Lazarus could do for him, the rich man, what he did not do for Lazarus in the previous life, namely, walk over to him to bring comfort. But Abraham says, "No, you had your good things in the previous life while Lazarus did not. Now he receives the comfort that eluded him in life, while it's your turn to live in agony."

And then as if to add insult to injury, Abraham adds, "he couldn't come over to you anyway, because, you see, there is this chasm between us."

Now, how would this story have been received by Jesus' listeners? With stunned amazement. In Jesus' time, it was assumed that if a man was rich, it was a sign that he had found favor with God – probably because he was a good and righteous person. Conversely, if someone had a disease or misfortune, it was assumed this was a punishment from God for previous sins. In other words, everyone listening to this story would assume at that outset that the rich man was rich because he was righteous and that Lazarus was suffering because he deserved it. And of course, if they die, the rich man should be with Father Abraham and Lazarus should be tormented in Hades.

This sounds harsh, and yet we often think that way today. How often has any of us heard, or said ourselves, “the poor are poor because they're lazy,” or, “they just want to be poor,” or, “they just can't get their act together.” In other words, they're getting what they deserve and they're not really my business.

And many of you already know about the prosperity gospel in our country which suggests that the righteous will indeed be rewarded materially, financially. This idea has been around for a long time in the Calvinist Protestant work ethic that was foundational for the Pilgrims. Again, prosperity was seen as a sign of God's elect. So, we have a cultural default telling us that the wealthy and the poor each have what they deserve.

And what does Jesus say about all that? “Hogwash!” In this case, the rich man's wealth is not a sign of God's favor as much as an indictment of a greedy and deluded soul. And Lazarus? He never deserved to live the desperate life he did. Jesus' parable reminds us this is simply unjust and not what God intended!

The parable ends with the rich man suddenly becoming concerned about his brothers who are still living. They need to get the message so they don't end up here! So he asks Abraham again for a favor: would Lazarus go and tell his – the rich man's – brothers about what happened to him? No, says Abraham. If they can't listen to the law and the prophets, then they won't listen if someone rises from the dead, either.

And so, in the end, who are you and I, the rich man or Lazarus? Neither, because they're dead. We're the brothers, who are still living, who have the chance to listen to Moses and the prophets and Jesus.

Was the rich man tormented in Hades simply because he was rich and someone else was poor? Some might read it that way. More likely it was because the rich man did nothing to help Lazarus. He didn't see him, didn't care, or “maybe,” he thought, “he's just getting what he deserves.”

But didn't Moses once say, “Do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor”?

And when the Israelites were fed by manna in the wilderness, didn't God say through Moses that no one is to take more than they need and to make sure everyone has enough?

And didn't the prophet Isaiah say,

“Is not this the fast that I choose; to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the

hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them...”?

And didn't Jesus say, "I have come bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed"?

I could go on.

I challenge you to find one passage in the Bible where it says that those who are suffering, poor, sick, broken, oppressed, etc. should be left alone to pull themselves up by their bootstraps because they're just getting what they deserve! Those people are the apple of God's eye and it's not hard to understand why: God created them and loves them and seeks a full life for them in all of life's dimensions – spiritual and emotional, physical and material, and yes, social and economic.

And yet some people enjoy feasts while others starve. Some live in mansions while others lack even a roof over their head. Some enjoy widespread acceptance while others are ostracized from human community. Some have access to medical care and others do not. We learn in scripture that none of this is viewed as an acceptable outcome to God. And so God goes to the margins to love the lost and the tormented. He did it through the prophets and through Jesus and he does it through us!

The rich man found himself on the wrong side of a chasm, but that chasm didn't just show up in the afterlife. He had chosen a life where he didn't know how much was enough, a life that was cut off from his fellow human beings who were suffering, and so, in the next life, that is exactly where he finds himself: cut off from his fellow human beings by a chasm of his own creation. He chose his own destiny. Despite his abundant wealth, the rich man did not have an abundant life, but a sad, paper thin, counterfeit life - not life as God intended it, where we love our neighbor as ourself.

For us it is so important to realize that God saves us into a life that is connected to our brothers and sisters who are different from us, and who struggle. The community that Christ gathered at the cross is *is* our new life and our salvation – a rich, diverse, compassionate community where love is real, where life and resources are shared. We *all* need this connection, not just the destitute.

For us, we always have two considerations, inward and outward. We who have enough and more than enough have to ask ourselves, "how much is enough?" so that we don't get caught up chasing materialistic gods. If we don't check ourselves and repent of our greed, we get lost in a hurry. We become the jerk and worse. We lose track of people like Lazarus and of our soul.

And we have to look outwardly and ask ourselves, "do I *see Lazarus* or do I willfully look right past him?" For we who are in Christ, that is not an option. Our connection to Lazarus is really to Christ, and to life itself.

Where do you see Lazarus and what does that mean for us? Amen.