

Luke 16:19-31 ¹⁹ “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 lifted up his eyes 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 I beg you, father, 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 from the dead goes to them, 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.’ ”

Luke 16:19-31

09/25/2022 – Saginaw First UMC

“The Courage and Conviction to Care”

Rev. Amy Terhune

This past week, Brad and I watched the new Ken Burns special on PBS entitled “The US and the Holocaust”. I grew up in North Shore Chicago area. As a small child, I apparently asked my mom why there were so many Christmas specials on TV when most of the world was Jewish. To which she replied, “most of *your* world is Jewish.” Growing up in that context, I learned about the Holocaust from an early age. I heard survivors speak – saw their tattooed numbers on their forearms – heard the harrowing stories of how the social climate in Germany heated up rather slowly, so that many didn’t realize the danger until it was too late. Watching Ken Burns special this week was nevertheless eye-opening. I was not aware of how much we knew, or how little action we took. Nor was I aware of how pervasive antisemitism was here...and still is.

But what really strikes me again and again is how human nature responds to these horrid times in history. In the 1940s, some propagated great hatred and animosity. And some organized, resisted, helped. That’s always how it is. But most – most refused to comprehend what was happening. They denied facts. They remained apathetic, indifferent, afraid to get involved. And that is how genocide happened. How it still happens.

“I read recently that in Sao Paulo, Brazil, police have stopped seeking to remove beggars and other unsavory people from their streets. Instead, they’re seeking to wall off the poor from the rest of the population. The city’s rich have literally risen above it all by using helicopters to bypass poorer areas. There are now 240 helicopter landing pads in Sao Paulo, Brazil compared to just 30 or so in New York City (not including hospitals). Well, I guess that’s one way to deal with the problem. Get a helicopter and fly over it all. [from Richard Watson, *Future Files: A Brief History of the Next 50 Years* (Boston: Nicholas Breasley Publishing, 2010); as used in “You Never Noticed” by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.] I’m sure if our rich man in this morning’s text had access to a helicopter, he probably would have used it. This morning’s text is all about denial, indifference, blindness. Human Nature.

Now, if you're anything like me, you heard this morning's text and now find yourselves very uncomfortable. After all, what are we supposed to do with a story like this! It's another one of those parables that all of us—preacher included—secretly wish Jesus had never told! Not that we have anything against the poor and suffering, and not that we don't understand our responsibility (and even hold a certain heartfelt commitment) to love and help all God's people. It's just...well...what an awful way to make a point! It feels a little like fear tactics. Do this or else! My own experience as a parent tells me this rarely works. I mean, sure, it may get something done in the moment. But it doesn't change hearts or minds. And yet before we write this off as too disturbing or disheartening for Sunday morning, let's dig into it a bit. As one might expect from Jesus, there is something deeper, something better, something more effective and heart-warming going on here.

But first, let's be clear about what is not going on here. This is not a condemnation of wealth. Remember, Father Abraham was extremely wealthy. His great grandson Joseph became both wealthy and powerful as the second in command to the Pharaoh in Egypt. King David and King Solomon were wealthy. Job was wealthy. Some of the disciples had means. But none of these wealthy people gave in to the love of money. They were in love with God. They were utterly faithful.

Nor is this a romanticizing of poverty. Poverty in and of itself is not virtue. There is nothing God would like more than to see poverty eradicated upon the earth. It is not economic status that determines our status with God.

Nor is this a factual depiction of heaven and hell, as if they're geographic fixed points in the universe. Rest assured, this is not really a parable about the next life at all. This is a parable all about this life. If you're trying to figure out who to identify with in this parable, I would suggest we place ourselves squarely in the shoes of one of the rich man's five brothers.

Finally, this is not a reversal of the basic theological tenet that God's grace alone is our ticket to salvation. This is not a parable meant to suggest that we can earn our way into heaven with our good works. We can't, and heaven help us if we ever get to a point where we think we can. In fact, grace is the good news in this. It is the grace of God that gives us chance after chance after chance to grow—to put off indifference and learn to see, to care, to give.

As we look at the text, we need to fill in some background here. In order for this to make sense, we must be clear about understandings and beliefs in Jesus' day. It was routinely taught and believed back then that one's circumstances in life were the direct result of God's pleasure or displeasure with you as a person. In the ninth chapter of John, for example, Jesus and his disciples are walking along, and they see a man who was born blind. The disciples ask Jesus, "who sinned—that man or his parents—that he was born blind?" They're trying to understand God based on their own assumption that this man's misfortune must be the result of someone's sin. Jesus immediately contradicts the question, thus undermining the whole notion that sin and misfortune must be related, but his disciples don't get it right away. So in this story, a poor man covered in sores and laying in the street would have been seen by Jesus' audience as a great sinner—a bad man, well deserving of his fate.

In contrast, the rich man, dressed in purple linen (the most expensive dye and clothe of that age) had obviously earned God's favor. He's the good guy. He's the hero. He's the one they all want to be like. He's the one they think God wants them to be like. And if we're honest, he's the one we want to be like, too, isn't he? I mean, if you had to pick... If we don't understand their mindset, we will never understand how profound and world-altering this text really was for them. And if we don't understand their mindset, we'll never understand the wealthy man.

“See, part of what makes this text disconcerting is that the wealthy man isn’t really a bad guy. He doesn’t kick Lazarus or spit on him or tell him to get up off his lazy duff and go get a job. He doesn’t ridicule or hurt or cause him harm. In fact, he lets Lazarus stay there at the gate. If a man like this Lazarus parked himself in front of Jeff Bezos’ gate, or Bill Gates’ gate, how long would he be allowed to lay there? Less than an hour, I’ll bet. But day after day, Lazarus lays there. So what’s the problem? I’ll tell you. The wealthy man doesn’t see. He’s separated himself out, walled off his home, allowing access through a gate only to those he wishes to include. He acts as though it was all supposed to be this way in life. He accepts it all without question. It never occurs to him that the fate of Lazarus’ birth and the fate of his birth could be changed. Lazarus, therefore, became not a part of suffering humanity but just a part of the landscape. In a word, the rich man was indifferent: indifferent to his plight, indifferent to his hunger, indifferent to his needs.” [adapted from “Neighbors Who Never Met” by Brett Blair and Staff, www.Sermons.com.]

Even in death, the rich man doesn’t get it. His walled-off existence is his hell. His mindset clues us in to his belief that Lazarus is beneath him. Send Lazarus to cool my tongue. Send Lazarus to my brothers. Lazarus is the servant, see? The rich man never does realize that he has more than five brothers—he’s got at least six. The man at his gate is one of them.

This parable for today about the wealthy man and Lazarus will do little good if it only succeeds in frightening us. Fear is a very poor motivator. It only works for a sprint. It doesn’t endure. God wants us to endure in faith. God wants us to know grace and extend grace. God wants us to see. Indifference is diametrically opposed to growth, to hope, to discovery, to change, and to love. It is God’s grace—God’s great love for us—that hungers to break down walls, to open our eyes, to thaw our hearts and minds to the truly distressing and overwhelming problems we face in this day and age. But even more than that, Jesus tells this parable in the hopes that we will open our eyes to the Lazaruses at our gates—the welfare moms, the derelict druggies, the migrant worker, the soldier suffering from PTSD, the student that just not quite making grades to pass, the child who receives toys, games and gadgets, but never a parents’ time. They are on the streets and in the waiting rooms of this world. They are also in the cubicles next to us and in the houses next door.

This passage is about learning to see. It’s also about learning to care—to let the world penetrate and affect us. I love the story told about a young woman from the remote town of Victory, Vermont:

“No school, no church, no store, and famous for being the last town in Vermont to receive electricity. During the course of earning her master’s degree, this friend found it necessary to commute several times a week from Victory to the state university in Burlington, a good hundred miles away. Coming home late at night, she would see an old man sitting by the side of the road. He was always there, in sub-zero temperatures, in stormy weather, no matter how late she returned. He just sat there—he made no acknowledgment of her when she drove by.

“She often wondered what brought him to that same spot every evening—what stubborn habit, private grief or mental disorder. Finally, she asked a neighbor, ‘Have you ever seen an old man who sits by the road late at night?’

“‘Oh, yes,’ said her neighbor, ‘many times.’

“‘Is he...a little touched in the head?’ she asked.

“‘He’s no more touched than you or me,’ her neighbor laughed, ‘and he goes home right after you do. You see, he doesn’t like the idea of you driving by yourself out late all alone on these back roads, so every night he walks out to wait for you. When he sees your taillights disappear around the bend and he knows you are okay, then he goes home to bed.’”

“All of which seemed a little strange to this young woman until one dark night in a blizzard when she couldn’t make out the edge of the road and wound up drifting into a snowbank on the shoulder. Thoroughly stuck, and with no cell phone service that far out, she prepared to hunker down for a long night. But after about an hour, she spotted headlights slowly growing closer ahead of her. Soon the elderly man and another neighbor had pulled their pickup truck alongside her. “I knew when I didn’t see you pass that something must have happened, and your grandmother’d be mighty worried,” said the man. They dug her out, got her back onto the road, and led her home. [As told by a colleague of Rev. Eugene Nelson, Jr.; as used in “Living In Denial” by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.]

There’s a neighbor who really lives out Christ’s call to ‘neighborliness’. And she didn’t even know his name. He saw his neighbor and all the stress of school in a far-away place. He saw, and he cared. Not only that, but he gave. He gave up some comfort, some time, some energy.

That is the call on our lives. Denial and indifference ceases to hold power in our lives when we open our eyes to see, open our hearts to care, open our hands to give. Life is found in the giving.

You’ve probably heard the story Richard Patt tells about a beautiful lake that lost its zesty freshness. The water formerly had been clear. It was alluring to animals and people alike. But early one summer, it became covered with a green scum. The farm animals became ill from drinking the water. Nobody wanted to swim in it. Tourism in the area took a real hit. Alarmed, the community called in an analyst to evaluate the situation and hopefully help them solve the problem. Well, it only took the analyst a couple of hours to identify the issue. Debris collecting from the hard spring rains had stopped up the dam and prevented the free flow of water, not into the lake, but out of the lake. When the spillway was cleared, the lake was soon fresh and clean again. The flow both in and out was necessary to keep the water pure! [from Richard W. Patt, *All Stirred Up*, CSS Publishing, in illustrations for Luke 16:19-31, www.Sermons.com.]

You know where I’m going with this, right? The same principle applies to you and me as human beings. I’m not talking only about financial wealth. I’m also talking about the wealth of time, talent, intellect, gifts, and energy represented by the body of Christ right here in this place. The blessings of life flow to you and me, but if we fail to realize that most of these blessings are not meant just to flow to us, but through us, for the good of others around us, then we get stopped up, full of floating debris, covered in grime. Over time, like soap scum on the shower door, our vision becomes distorted, blocked, fuzzy. And in time, if not corrected, we forget who and whose we are. We forget our purpose and we get lost in fear. We may not see it, but God sees it and grieves it.

For the sake of our souls, for the sake of the neighbor we haven’t met, and for the sake of our children and the future of our world, I pray this parable bothers you as much as it bothers me. I pray it makes us question our motives a little more diligently. I pray it leads us out of fear, and into renewal and grace and the awareness of God’s presence. I pray it stokes a hunger to see, to care, to give. I pray we come to understand that we belong among the five brothers who still have a chance to change our perspective. And I pray, above all, that it leads us to shun indifference and apathy and denial, and to find the courage and conviction to care. For this is what inspires hope, and this is what will transform the world. May God make it so. Amen.