

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.’ ”

Response to the Word

One: This is the Word of God for the people of God

All: Thanks be to God!

Luke 16:19-31

09/28/2025 – Saginaw First U.MC.

“Even If Someone Rises from the Dead”

Rev. Amy Terhune

Earlier this month, a group of journalists on Fox News were discussing the murder of 23-year-old Iryna Zarutska, who was a Ukrainian Refugee living in Charlotte, NC. She was stabbed on a bus by a mentally-ill homeless man one evening in late August. As they discussed the issue of mental illness, homelessness, and violence, one of the journalists, in a seemingly off-handed unthinking comment, suggested that if the homeless refuse the government programs offered, they should be sent to jail or be forcibly killed by lethal injection. Which raised an outcry from a lot of people across the political spectrum. And rightly so, too. Now don’t get me wrong. In this particular case, this man had a history of violence. His own mother had been begging authorities to involuntarily commit him to psychiatric care. The system failed in epic proportions and a young woman lost her life. Nobody wanted that. We need to talk about solutions. But I can guarantee you that no matter how dire things get, forced euthanasia is no more a solution today than it was when the gas ovens at Auschwitz were running 85 years ago. In the past month, I’ve heard murder floated as a solution for the ridding us of left wing liberal and right wing extremists, homeless bums and inept leaders. The 4th of the 10 commandments is “Thou shalt not kill.” God offers no exceptions and no qualifying arguments. Murder is not a solution for anything. But I remain alarmed by way violence is pitched as a solution again and again and again. We’re in deep trouble, and the solution isn’t killing off the ones we don’t like, the ones who are inconvenient, uncomfortable or antisocial. Understanding them is much harder... and much more in line with Christ’s teachings.

In our scripture lesson this morning, we encounter a homeless man who camps out at the gate of a wealthy neighbor. Jesus calls him Lazarus, and as far as I can tell, he is neither mentally ill nor violent. His only crime, it seems, is that he's poor. How that came to be, I don't know. Maybe he lost everything. Maybe he's been poor his entire life. What I do know is that in Jesus' day, the people equated poverty with immorality. If one was poor, it's because they were bad. That's what they thought. And we're not as different as we like to pretend we are. Still today, many truly believe that if one is poor, they must be lazy or high or abusing the system. If one poor, it's because their parents didn't raise them right, didn't teach them to make good choices, didn't take them to church. Which is not necessarily true. There are a lot of people who work hard, who have deep faith, loving families, and good educations who happen to be poor. I would guess it's the silent majority that you never hear about. If one starts with the deck stacked against them, it's a whole lot harder to rise up from the streets. And for too many of us, all it takes is one predatory loan, one severe illness, one car accident, one wayward family member, one mistake at work, and events can spiral out of control quickly for the whole household. Most of us don't want to think about that. We want to believe that the system is fair and that if we follow the rules, we'll be okay. That's what is comfortable. Neither statistics nor anecdotal evidence backs it up, but we don't usually face that until we've lost something... or everything.

Conversely, sometimes people read this scripture and go so far as to romanticize poverty. I actually heard a woman tell me once that the poor are so lucky because they have no choice but to rely on God, so they must see many more miracles than she ever would. I wanted to take her by the shoulders and shake her. Yes, there are some folks whose poverty has deepened their faith and their trust, but there's just as many who've grown jaded and cynical. Poverty in and of itself is not virtue. There is nothing God would like more than to see poverty eradicated upon the earth, and we are called in scripture repeatedly to care for the poor, serve the poor, provide for the poor. Because God cares deeply about those in poverty. It is not economic status that determines our status with God.

The wealthy man in our scripture this morning is not named by Jesus in the story, but history has called him Divees. Decked out in purple linen (the most expensive dye and clothe of that age), this guy had obviously earned God's favor – that's what Jesus' audience must think. 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. As far as I can tell, he doesn't even consider killing Lazarus, nor does he 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.

Now, I've never been a big fan of this parable, if you want the honest truth. It's one of those parables that I kind of wish Jesus had never told! I try to be sensitive, compassionate, generous personally. I try to advocate for justice and responsible policies that will help all God's people. It's just...well...what an awful way to make a point! It feels a little like fear tactics, like a veiled threat, even. 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 for the long term.

But then I remember a little story about a boy saying his nightly prayers together with his Daddy. He began with a traditional, if troubling, old prayer. "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep". But then he got a little mixed up, and prayed, "If I wake before I die...". Well that doesn't rhyme with what comes next, and he look up at his father guiltily, knowing he'd made a mistake. But his father comforted him. "Son, my deepest prayer is that you'll wake before you die." [from Robert C. Morgan, *Lift High The Cross*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), pp. 99-100; adapted heavily from "Who Is Your Lazarus?" by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.] And that get's to the crux of what this parable is really about.

Before I push that further, let me pause to add a side-note in here. It would be a mistake to take this parable as a factual depiction of heaven and hell, as though the two were geographic locations with physical characteristics like fire or a banquet table. Those are common images used to talk about the experience of eternity, but I would caution you against taking them literally.

However – and this will be less popular—I would caution all of us against assuming that there are not consequences to our behavior, our words, our choices. There are. In the church, we talked a lot about grace—about living grace and extending grace. And you will remember that the most basic definition of grace is that even when we turn our backs on God, God doesn't turn his back on us. God deals with us, not according to what our behavior merits, but according to God's enormous love for us. Grace is God's very nature.

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 wake up before we die. 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 open our eyes and 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 wake up and see the Lazaruses at our gates—the welfare moms, the derelict druggies, the migrant worker, the soldier suffering Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, 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 beside 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. It's no secret that I've never like this parable much, but history has it that there was an author who was particularly intrigued and touched by this parable after he heard it read in church one Sunday . So much so, in fact, that he went home and wrote a book about a man who did have someone come back from the grave to warn him of the dangers of greed and indifference. Can you guess the story? It's *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens. In the story, Jacob Marley walks the earth, dragging a wretched chain he forged in life. When he expresses regret to Ebenezer Scrooge

about his failure to repent, Scrooge comforts him that he was always a good man of business. Marley's reply is one you may know well! "Business! Humankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, benevolence, were all my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!" The beauty of the story, of course, is that Ebenezer Scrooge does hear, does learn, does repent and change. The spirits help him to see, and more importantly, they help him to feel again. What began as humbug and a bit of bad beef ends with a vow to keep Christmas in his heart and to serve humankind with love, grace, and compassion. Every Christmas, we watch it, reflect on it, cherish the story of redemption all over again. Charles Dickens rewrites the parable to give hope – and I can't help but think that Jesus probably appreciates it. Because the point is that it's not too late to see, to give, to help, to love. And it changes the quality of our lives in ways we least expect.

One of things about this parable that I find fascinating is the exchange at the end between Abraham and the wealthy man, who wants his brothers to be warned. Abraham says that if they don't believe Moses, they won't believe even if a man should rise from the dead. But don't be fooled by that. You see, a man did rise from the dead, didn't he? And he calls us to the newness of life. So 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 wakes us up before we die. 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. 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 renews our spirits, our hope, and our world. Thanks be to God. Amen.