

Sunday, June 12, 2022

A Compassionate Community

(Series: "Stories of Jesus")

(Message One)

(Luke 16:19-31)

Scripture

¹⁹"There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. ²⁰At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores ²¹and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

²²"The time came when the beggar died, and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.'

²⁵"But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. ²⁶And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.'

²⁷"He answered, 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, ²⁸for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.'

²⁹"Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.'

³⁰"'No, father Abraham,' he said, '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, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"

Message

The church meeting was interrupted by a woman who said, "Pastor Doug, there is a man at the door who says he really needs to speak to you."

"Can it wait until the meeting is done?"

"He sounds pretty desperate," she said her face looking concerned.

“Okay, I’ll be there in a minute.” (They always ask for the pastor; I’ve been taken numerous times and have become a bit jaded.)

“How can I help you?” I asked.

“Pastor, I haven’t eaten in three days. Can you please give me some money to eat?”

“No, I can’t give you any money,” I said, “but I can take you to a place and buy some food for you.” He didn’t look so good; he didn’t smell so good; but he seemed genuinely grateful. And at the buffet restaurant, he ate enough to feed a small army.

Today we’re going to look at a Jesus’ story, a parable Jesus tells about a rich man and a poor man. Jesus expresses his love for us in his storytelling. Every word in his story is significant.

Some commentators say this is a story about social justice – and it kind of is. Some pastors preach this story as a warning against ending up in hell – noted! Some suggest it’s primarily a call for believers to be generous – that is true! Some think it admits life is not fair, but God will even things up in the next life. But first and foremost, it is a story Jesus tells about the **Kingdom of God**.

As a parable of the Kingdom, this story is not concerned about the next world, but it is concerned with inviting the Kingdom to break into the here and now world. As a parable of the Kingdom, the lessons to be learned are for us who follow Jesus.

For many of us, like believers in Jesus’ day, a **false narrative (the result of sin) has infiltrated and impacted what we think is the “**truth**.”**

For example, many believe “*God helps those who help **themselves**.*” (A pastor said that to me one time as he reached across me for the salt and pepper. 😊) That is not in the Bible. It’s from Poor Richard’s Almanac (Ben Franklin). It provides us sturdy protection against the need to help those who are in need. (If God will not help these lazy people, I should also be off the hook.)

A second false narrative is, “*If I give anything away, I will have **less**.*” This scarcity narrative assumes whatever I give away is lost, whatever I share is gone, whatever I provide for another contributes to my own lack. It is built on simple math: “If I give you some of my cookie, there is less for me.”

A third false narrative suggests that “*What is **mine** is **mine** to use for me.*” This entitlement narrative teaches [all] the things I possess are to be used the way I see fit - which often means using them for me and not for others. What is mine is mine; I earned it; I deserve it.

These narratives all come from the world; they all have no place in God's Kingdom; and, yet, they seem to impact our heart, our lifestyle, and our daily actions.

Jesus, as he often did, tells a story to **correct the **false**, world-focused narrative about His Kingdom.**

THE CONTEXT

Just before in Luke (16:9-13), Jesus was talking about God and **mammon.** Mammon is Aramaic for "material possessions, **money**, that which sustains life."

Jesus had three things to say there:

First, "*No servant can serve **two** masters...You cannot serve **God** and **money**.*" It can be used to serve God, but mammon often usurps God's place in human lives.

Second, "*If you have not been faithful with unrighteous mammon, who will entrust the truth to you?*" (i.e., those who cheat on their taxes don't understand the Gospel).

Third, "*If you've not been faithful in what is someone else's, who will give you something of your own?*" All possessions belong to God; we are merely stewards of them. God looks to see if his people are faithful stewards of what he has entrusted to them and then decides if he'll reveal to them the "*deep things of God.*" (1 Cor. 2:20)

The potential transforming power of these truths is limitless.

Pharisees, like most people - even today - were lovers of money who "lifted their noses" at Jesus. (16:14-15). It was a gesture of disdain, of condescension. It is Jesus' teaching on money (possessions) that trigger this story. This story is the third part of a trilogy (the prodigal wastes his **father's** possessions; the dishonest steward wastes his **master's** possessions; the rich man wastes his own possessions).

THE COMMENTARY

The first scene is a brief but brilliant picture of a **self-indulgent person who cares **only** for himself.**

The story begins with a man in a posh house in an exclusive neighborhood who has everything. The text suggests he wore his purple robes every day - purple cloth was worth its weight in gold - to **show everyone** around him that he had money! Jesus notes his "*fine linen*" (Greek, *bussos* - a reference to

Egyptian cotton used to make the best underwear). He had purple robes, and, if anyone asked, he wore the best underwear.

He feasted **sumptuously** every day (NIV., “lived in **luxury** every day.”) That means he didn’t observe Sabbath (he didn’t allow his servants to rest) and publicly violated the Ten Commandments – at least every week.

His self-indulgent lifestyle was more important than God’s law; the injustice he inflicted meant nothing to him; he never worried about God’s judgment.

The next scene finds a sick, hungry beggar laying just outside the rich man’s gate. Jesus named him, **Lazarus** (the only person named in all of Jesus’ parables). His name means “*the one whom God helps.*”

That is interesting. Lazarus is always hungry, so sick he can’t walk or stand, so poor he is reduced to begging. It doesn’t seem like God is helping him much.

The only one in town who could help Lazarus was the rich man, so people would carry him daily to the rich man’s gates, hoping the rich man would feel some compassion and help Lazarus. (It is a common practice in the Middle East.) The rich man, every time he walked in and out of his house, walked by Lazarus.

Note the rich man has a gate on his property in addition to a door to his house; so there is land, probably a garden, around his house sealed off by the gate.

Lazarus desires (i.e., longed for; wants, but is unable to have) to be fed with the bread that fell from the rich man’s table. In the days before napkins, people would wipe their hands on chunks of bread and toss them on the floor. Lazarus longs for these scraps, but they were likely given to the estate’s guard dogs.

Lazarus is sick, hungry, covered with sores – but his **deepest suffering** is **emotional**. The gate is certainly within earshot of the daily banquets of the rich man. People walked in and out of the estate; they didn’t need the food, he did. Help was always close, but never extended.

Beggars are everywhere in the Middle East. One’s resources are limited. After a bit, no one even notices them. Compassion fatigue becomes a way to survive. Maybe that’s what happened to the rich man.

Even the dogs came and licked his sores. As westerners, we view this as a continuation of the rich man’s inexcusable behavior, a continuing torment and insulting of an already painful existence.

It is actually the opposite. Dogs lick their own wounds. They lick people as a sign of affection. (Ancients knew that if a dog licked your wounds they healed faster; Harvard scientists have found a dog’s saliva contains peptide antibiotics.)

So the rich man will do nothing for Lazarus, but these wild guard dogs – designed to attack strangers and keep people away – show more compassion

than the rich man and do what they can by licking Lazarus' wounds. Jesus is saying even the dogs have **more compassion** than this rich man.

This harmony tells us a lot about Lazarus – he was kind, gentle, and lived in quiet harmony with the (animal) world around him. Lazarus is a “gentle soul.” Jesus wants us to see and absorb the contrast between these two people.

Then Lazarus and the rich man die. (16:22) Lazarus is too poor for a funeral, but angels transport him up to **heaven**, literally, to “*Abraham's bosom*” - a place of honor. (At the Last Supper, John reclined in the bosom of Jesus; **John 13:23**)

The rich man dies, is given a funeral, and is buried. He lands in **hell** (Hades). The one who had nothing but God, now was everything; the one who had everything but God, now has nothing.

The tension between the rich man and Lazarus continues in the afterlife – a tension that is essential to the meaning of this parable.

Notice: the rich man now **recognizes** Lazarus. So he **knew** Lazarus was at his gate. So now he'll apologize to Lazarus and ask for his forgiveness, right?! No, he still doesn't speak to Lazarus and continues to ignore him and instead addresses Abraham, “*My father, Abraham, have mercy on me.*”

Notice: he plays the family card. He has Jewish blood in his veins. Surely, he figures this will guarantee **assistance** from Abraham. It doesn't. Family is everything in the Middle East. When one is in need, one can always return to family knowing they are bound to be merciful. Not this time. You'd think he would be embarrassed to be begging from Abraham; but the rich man evidences no such embarrassment.

Notice: the rich man verbalizes the cry of a **beggar**: “*Have mercy on me.*” He is now the beggar he detests; he longs to be “*the one God helps*” (Lazarus), but it is too late. His first request, to have Lazarus cool his tongue, is outrageous. When Lazarus was in pain, the rich man ignored him for a lifetime; now he is in pain, and he expects Lazarus to do something about it – immediately!

Instead of an apology, he demands services from the very man he refused to serve. He apparently had seen Lazarus with his eyes, but never with his heart. The rich man's callousness is so embedded in his DNA he doesn't even know it. One would think his current realities would change and humble him and he would at least apologize to Lazarus to please Abraham. It's not happening. There is no **contrition**. There is no apology. He cannot even imagine that the social stratifications no longer apply. But the tables have turned.

Notice: Lazarus is now in the power position reclining beside Abraham himself. Lazarus remains **silent**. He remains true to his character. The gentle, long-

suffering man has no reservoir of **anger** ready to explode, no plans for retaliation, no score to settle, no vengeance to extract. (We'd say he has every right to!)

Lazarus says volumes by what he chooses not to say; he was quiet in his powerless days of suffering; he is quiet in his days of power – even as his lifelong tormentor makes demands from him.

Notice: even while frying in hell, the rich man **fails** to get the **point**. How does one respond to such pride? Arrogance? Self-centeredness? Eternal self-destruction?

Abraham addresses him with a term of affection, “son.” (It’s the same word the father uses for his elderly son in the Prodigal Sons parable.) Abraham doesn’t deny the rich man is family; but he repeats the classical cry of the Old Testament prophets as they called a wayward Israel to repentance: **“Remember...”**

Remember you received good things. (The passive verb underscores that the rich man has neither earned nor deserves the good life he had; it was a gift from God.) All he had, including his good health, was a gift from a gracious God.

Remember Lazarus received **bad** things; he’s now **comforted** while the rich man is in anguish. Lazarus isn’t described as *healed*; that would imply his main issue was his sores. Lazarus isn’t described as *well fed*; that would imply his hunger was the issue.

Lazarus is described as *comforted* because outside the gate, he was in anguish. Reclining with Abraham he finally knows someone cares. He is no longer outside a banquet hall producing garbage he can’t eat because it feeds the dogs. He is at the banquet table. God gave good things to the rich man and the rich man passed along evil things to Lazarus. (That ticks God off!)

Abraham points out there is a great **chasm** (in distance and understanding) between them that cannot be **bridged**. Who would want to journey from heaven to hell?

The text implies **Lazarus** was **willing**! Picture Lazarus whispering to Abraham: *“Father Abraham, that’s my old neighbor down there. We’ve known each other for years. He is in major pain. We have lots of water here; if it pleases you, I’d be glad to take a glass to him.”*

Lazarus’ nature is again revealed. He refrains from gloating over the rich man’s well-deserved punishment. Instead, he shows the **compassion** he never received. He has been there.

There is another who spanned this chasm, who crossed this gulf between heaven and hell. He came from **heaven** and suffered the **pain** and torment of **hell**. His name was **Jesus**. He did it so you and I wouldn’t have to. He did it so we could be a part of his Kingdom. He does it because he is the one who helps.

Once again, the rich man becomes a **beggar**: *“I have five brothers, warn them...”* It sounds noble. The one who ignored God (and Lazarus) now pleads for missionaries. Presumably, they are like he is – rich, and so they really matter. *“If Lazarus can’t be a table waiter, maybe he could be my errand boy and serve his superiors...and go tell my siblings...”* (Yeah, maybe not.)

Commentators note the rich man’s family consisted of six brothers (the symbol of evil); if they had accepted Lazarus, they’d have been seven (perfection).

Abraham reminds him they have **Moses** (law) and the **prophets** like everyone does. If they were so busy feeding their face every day every day, they’d have heard the law and the prophets warning the rich and offering compassion for the poor. They, and his brothers, had every opportunity (as do we, over and over).

The rich man, unaccustomed to anyone saying no to him, tries again: *“No, Father Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.”* The rich man tries to correct Abraham as he would an inferior: “No, you’re wrong!” Notice Lazarus had just *appeared* to the rich man *beyond* the grave and the rich man still didn’t repent, apologize, or humble himself. Nothing changes. If the *fire* didn’t change him, there appears to be little hope for his brothers.

THE CONCLUSION

The parable is a picture of our world – including Christians – where the haves treatment of the have nots reflects a lack of love and compassion. It should not be! It will not be in the kingdom.

Ken Bailey suggests this parable is packed with spiritual truths. They underscore that the Kingdom of God is a **compassionate community...**

1. God cares how we respond to the **graces** and **pains** of life with the good things God has given us. Are we hoarding or sharing his gifts?
2. The rich man had money and figured he didn’t need God. Lazarus had God, **nothing** more. God helps those who have **nothing**.
3. There’s **no** opportunity for **repentance** after **death**. The call to repentance comes from the Word and the witness of Scripture. God’s patience ends with our death. Now is the time to embrace Jesus!
4. Our heritage, pedigree, even our family cannot save us; we must **know Jesus**.
5. The idea that wealth means God’s **blessing** and poverty means one has **sinned** is hereby officially and totally rejected.
6. Wealth isn’t condemned in Scripture. **Failing to acknowledge** it comes from/belongs to God is condemned. Wealth corrupts. (We’re wealthy by world’s standards!)

7. Our **mission** is found on our **doorstep**. This parable is a call to compassion close to home.
8. Wealth is not evenly distributed in our world, but we are not to **waste** our **resources** on ourselves while the tears of the poor and powerless are **ignored**.
9. There is **life** after **death**. There is a day, a time, of squaring. The rich man's failure to love God and neighbor is not unnoticed.
10. The rich man saw a "resurrected" Lazarus and failed to believe. To demand proof for the great mysteries is to **cheapen** the **faith**.

Jesus teaches here that members of His Kingdom have a **compassionate heart and be a **compassionate community** that embraces our **neighbor** and reflects the good gifts and suffering that life brings to everyone.**

The silence of Lazarus throughout this parable is impressive. He never murmurs against God's distribution of wealth, nor against the rich man's abuse of it in this world. In the next world he neither exults over the change of relations between himself and the rich man nor protests against being asked to wait upon him in the place of torment or to go on errands for him to the visible world. (cf. Alfred Plummer)

He was indeed Lazarus – *the one whom God helped*.

The man at the Church door was not named Lazarus, *the one God helped*. It could have been. The one at your **door may not be named Lazarus either but may be the one **God** longs to **help** through you.**

Prayer:

Father, thank you for Jesus who was willing to give up his place in heaven, and take on the form of a human being to experience all the pain and suffering of hell – for our sake – so that we might be welcome in your heaven.

Father, we are beggars, who are desperately in need of your bread - your love, your grace, your compassion, and your care. Thank you for hearing our prayers and attended to our soul.

Father, open our eyes and our ears to the plight of the world around us who are desperately in need of the living bread. May we use what you have entrusted to us for the building of your Kingdom.

In the name of Jesus our Teacher and Rabbi, Amen.