

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, New Mexico
Sunday September 28, 2025 Proper 21C
Text: Luke 16:19-31 The Parable of Lazarus and Dives
Preacher: Christopher McLaren
Theme: The Lock is on the Inside

I see them all over the city, standing at the major intersections and the off-ramps with their small cardboard signs: "stranded anything will help," "hungry need food," "I wouldn't be doing this if I had a job," "homeless, jobless but not hopeless." I confess I'm never quite sure what to do from my car: empty my wallet, look the other way, change lanes, buy them a meal. My wife keeps a stock of granola bars in the car to hand out. I remember one morning on the way to St. Mark's finally finding one of the granola bars as I was moving past the light at Lomas and chucking one of them out like a long pass to an unhoused man running a post pattern up the middle, he shucked the defender, dropped his cardboard sign, and made a leaping move to his left catching the granola bar high above his head. We smiled and cheered and he yelled out, "thanks and nice toss." It was a brief moment of connection and levity in the crushing reality of poverty.

Today's parable of Lazarus and the rich man is really a tough story, with a decidedly unhygienic beggar with oozing sores, slobbering dogs, places of torment and a great chasm fixed between heaven and hell. It is not an easy story to like, but one that we need to hear.

Every one of us has certain things we tell ourselves or whisper into our hearts as a way of insulating us from other's pain or misfortune. You know the phrases or sentiments: "if only he hadn't dropped out of school," or "if they would just learn English," "if they could only stop drinking," "hung out with the wrong people." or more compassionately "I wonder what their story is?" We all want to find a reason for misfortune even if they are gross oversimplifications and even just dead wrong. We weary and worry of how our system churns out victims. We want to explain things away so that we can move on and get on with being the way we are and not feel too much responsibility for other's misfortune. It really is a form of self-protection.

Our culture is one of espoused self-reliance and the myth of rugged individualism. Sure, we know that we are supposedly here to love our neighbors as ourselves but changing their lives or showing too much compassion for their misfortune -- now that seems a bit over-the-top. The great American myth is that anyone willing to work hard can come out on top. And that might be true if everyone were actually beginning at the same starting line. But the truth is, that is never the case for so many people. Some people start so far back from the starting line that they can run

and run and run until their lungs are heaving and their legs are burning and they may never see the dust of the “leaders at the front of the pack.”

For those of us with enough compassion and honesty to admit that we really did have a leg up or win the genetic lottery or had supportive intact families or somehow managed to escape the destructive patterns of addiction, it really can be sobering. There are some really difficult and humbling cases. There are people who have inherited poverty as surely as they have inherited brown eyes or blonde hair, and who when they hear the starting gun go off, they really aren't even sure which way to run. And even if they did it wouldn't matter much because they are ill-equipped, they don't have the right shoes, can't pay the registration fees, don't know the course, never have been properly instructed or trained and they don't really know the rules. When people see them, they are tempted to use one of those little rationalizations, “should have finished school” or “why are they not working.”

There are of course a lot of problems with such assumptions. The truth is that people have been treating one another this way for so long that it's hard to think of it differently. Some of the folks that had a really good head-start in the race can't really help but think that things are really just the way they are supposed to be and that the difference between them and those so far behind is so huge that God himself must have had something to do with it. It's tempting to think that some people are just blessed by God and for others their misfortune is really their reward or consequences. Maybe things work out the way they are supposed to, some people are punished by God for their sins while others are rewarded for their goodness and because God obviously likes them better? This kind of thinking has been around for a long time and religious people are expert at telling this story. Sometimes it is called the “wealth and prosperity gospel” but no matter what you call it, it amounts to seeing wealth as a kind of spiritual reward, a sure sign of God's favor.

You can find all manner of verses in the Bible to back up this kind of favorite son or daughter thinking. It was a rather popular view in Jesus' day as well as ours, especially among the rich. Deuteronomy 28 promises fertility, prosperity and success in conflicts to those who obey the Lord. Psalm 1 makes it abundantly clear that the almighty watches over the way of the righteous, but that the “wicked will perish.” For centuries people have been using the Bible as a kind of proof-text for their success and its link to God's favor and blessing in their life. Wealth was a sure sign of God's blessing and thus a good and holy thing to pursue and obtain. It's one reason that people who believe this to be true, especially religious types, will work themselves silly and perhaps even bend their ethics just a bit to prove that God's favor is actually with them that they are God's favorite entrepreneurs and therefore worthy of blessing.

It is a rather neat and tidy system that is self-reinforcing. Those who love and obey God are the successful ones and those who don't are punished or condemned to poverty. This tidy little system allows the wealthy to congratulate themselves on a life well-lived and it also allows them to ignore the less fortunate as they are getting

just what they deserve from the hand of God. There is no need to interfere with God's ways, the poor are getting what they deserve and who are they to stand in the way or try to change these things.

Well this "Prosperity Gospel" is not just something in the past it is alive and well today and in a whole host of subtle forms that all of us are actually susceptible to. But, Jesus didn't buy it. Jesus could not abide this kind of thinking and living and he despised this way of reading the sacred scriptures from which it emerged and was justified. Jesus was at pains in his teaching and preaching to point out that there are plenty of biblical passages that read in precisely the opposite way. Take for instance Deut. 15:11 "Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land." Or "Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but those who are kind to the needy honor him" (Proverbs 14:31). Far from condemning the poor these passages make it clear that God cares for the poor, in fact they demonstrate that God in fact has a preferential concern and love for the poor and identified with them. Jesus' view was not to ignore the down and out in Jerusalem but to invite them to become part of his family and its radical practice of table-fellowship.

*Jesus tries to get his point across by telling this remarkable story of Lazarus and the rich man. He doesn't so much point fingers and judge people as he does try to pull us into the kingdom through the transformation of story, by enlivening our imaginations. The point of Jesus' story is not guilt or self-hatred it is something very different than that. The point of the story is to tell us the truth in order that the truth might set us free, hold out a new way of life for us.

Surprisingly, the rich man doesn't seem to have a great deal of concern or even guilt when he finds himself in hell looking up at Lazarus the beggar cradled in the bosom of Abraham. Somehow the rich man still thinks he is in control and begins barking orders across the chasm that separates him from the place of the angels. "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 (vs. 24)."

But Abraham is quick to remind, "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."

Even on the far side of the grave, the rich man does not recognize Lazarus as a fellow human being but as a water boy. The rich man has never learned that Lazarus has always been his neighbor, living just on the outside of his door. His own salvation was only inches away but he could not see the person nor the need and now it is too late to cross over the fixed chasm between them.

Sometimes this parable is read as a wonderful example of trying to scare people into changing their lives. However, I'm not sure of the persuasiveness of this approach. The story itself undercuts this approach by suggesting that even firsthand

information about future torment from one recently returned from the dead is not enough to necessarily change lives.

I want to suggest that stories about heaven and hell may have a different target. They are not meant to convey information about the world beyond death. The real target of these stories is the assumptions and attitudes of this world here and now.

The story of the rich man and Lazarus begins this side of death and continues on the other side of death. What happens on the other side of death illuminates the truth of what is happening on this side of death. In particular, it tells us that the way the world works is not the way God works. The social arrangements of our time are not sanctioned by eternity. The theology that sees earthly riches as a sign of God's blessing and earthly poverty and illness as a sign of God's displeasure is mistaken. And to push it just little further, when this theology is used as a rationale for maintaining the gulf between rich and poor, and driving wealth disparity, it is particularly insidious and heretical. The real energy of God strives to rearrange the goods of the earth so that all the people of the earth share in them. The Kingdom of God, the ways of God will not support a status quo of inequality and want. Leaving behind this insidious theology of rich=blessing and poor=curse is a first step toward living life in a godward direction and new social arrangements.

This is a story for us not against us. Jesus did not tell this story because he was angry but because he wanted to wake people up to the Kingdom of God. There really are better things in life than the things we can get or buy for ourselves; there are things that God wants to give us, possessions that moth and rust cannot destroy. Our culture entertains us to death, stirs up our wants and desires and tries like hell to think we can be content with fine clothes and delicious food and endless creature comforts when God wants to give us the kingdom of God.

The Apostle Paul says it well:

As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

~ I Timothy 6

Life that is really life. That is what Jesus wants to give us.

The real problem is that we are a bit too skilled at cutting ourselves off from one another. Like the rich man, we fail to see how our lives are knit together with all other lives. We become blind to the common good and the immense power that people working together have to alter systems and work toward change. It not so much a matter of what God will do to us but what we have actually done to ourselves through blindness and indifference.

The best thing about this parable is that it is not over yet. For the rich man perhaps it is over, yes, but not for us, because we still have time. We are like the five brothers. In fact, we are the five brothers. Even though Abraham would not allow Lazarus to go back and warn the five siblings, Jesus has smuggled the story out for us. Now we have this parable, as well as Moses and the prophets and someone who has risen from the dead to convince us that there is a different way to live, a way that is true. Now all that remains to be seen is whether we desire life that is really life.

Scripture's directive to bridge the gap between the rich and poor is clear and in truth we probably have the resources to do it. But the path toward accomplishing it is unclear and difficult. As one theologian put it: The path of advance must be discovered by people who have heard this powerful word from the story of the rich man and Lazarus and asked how it could be put into action. Over the weekend I was reading *Grace can Lead us Home: A Christian Call to End Homelessness* by Kevin Nye. It's an incredible book but one of the things he is clear about when he talking to his staff or others is that it is an enormous problem and we could work 24/7 and give away everything we have and not solve the problems but we can begin to really see people and to treat others with compassion as real human beings. The Christian message is always searching for creative and imaginative disciples who can help to make spiritual truths into a new social reality. To be perfectly honest, it is still true that on one side of the door the rich man feasts and on the other side of the door Lazarus starves. Who can, or who will open that door? The real answer to the question begins with the profound truth that doors are locked from the inside.

Note: I wish to acknowledge my deep debt to the writing of Barbara Brown Taylor whose sermon on this text "A Fixed Chasm" was a model and inspiration for these words along with the commentary of Robert Capon and exegesis of William Willamon.