

Wake Up Call

Luke 16:19-31

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19 'There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. 20And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, 21who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. 22The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. 23In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. 24He 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." 25But 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. 26Besides 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." 27He said, "Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house— 28for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment." 29Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them." 30He said, "No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent." 31He 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."

Several years ago, Jodi decided it was time to go to the beach. It didn't need to be a long trip, she said, but after a particularly grueling courtroom trial, she wanted to feel the sand beneath her feet and the sounds of waves crashing. And while I am a "mountain person" more than a "beach person," there was no talking her out of this. Add to that the fact that Southwest was having a fare sale to Southern California and our destination was set.

As most of you know, the Southern California coastline features a number of great beaches. There's Newport Beach, Santa Monica Beach, Venice, Huntington, Laguna,

and, of course, Malibu. But, one of Jodi's clients recommended we check out Dana Point Beach. And he suggested we stay at a hotel called the Monarch Beach Resort.

Now, I know what you are thinking...I was thinking it, too. I figured that with the words "beach" and "resort" in the name, it would be a little more than we would generally spend on a hotel. But, given the recommendation, we decided to check it out online.

The pictures on the Monarch website were fabulous. There were pictures of families making s'mores at campfires on the beach. There were pictures of couples eating a first class dinner while the sun breathtakingly set on the ocean behind them. There were pictures of beautifully appointed guest rooms with balconies overlooking the ocean. It was spectacular! So, after perusing the site a little more, we decided we would look into booking two nights at this recommended hotel. Even better, as we got into the reservation process, we discovered they offered a AAA discount. So we selected a fairly basic room and pressed the button to check availability. The little circle whirled in the center of the computer screen for a few seconds while the reservations computer looked into our request. Soon, it popped up with good news. The room we wanted was available for our selected dates. That was great, but what was this beach fun going to cost me. My eyes were scanning for the price tag. Soon I found it. With our AAA discount, the total was \$1,449.00. And then I did a double take. It wasn't \$1,449 for our stay. It was \$1,449 per night!

We didn't stay at the Monarch Beach Resort that trip...

But that hasn't stopped the Monarch Beach Resort from regularly sending me a promotional email. Every email is carefully crafted to draw me in to what they have to offer. The full service spa. The range of cuisine at one of their seven restaurants. The beach house casual vibe. Oh, it is the lap of luxury in every way. But, it's out of my

price range. This is a place reserved for people with more disposable income than me. People like the rich man in our parable this morning.

Chances are, if he received an email from the Dead Sea Beach Resort and Spa, he wouldn't bat an eye at the room price. The room rate, a seven-course meal, resort fees, towel fees, a tip for the sommelier, a tip for the concierge...that would be pocket money to the rich man of our parable. There were wealthy, and then there were WEALTHY. He would fit in that second category.

As Jesus tells it, he lived in the lap of luxury. He wore purple linen clothing (a royal color and fabric that in Jesus' day reeked of money the same way a tailored silk Armani suit would do on a rich man today). He feasted sumptuously every day. This means he didn't just have lavish banquets with stretched tables full of food on special occasions. This kind of extravagant excessiveness was a daily occurrence. And the Greek word for "gate" that is used in verse 20 was not the word you'd use to describe the small gates most of us have on our backyard fence. It was the word reserved for soaring portals – the kind of huge and heavy wrought-iron gates you see if you drive around Beverly Hills.ⁱ

Truth be told, this rich man had everything we think we want. He could buy anything. He lived in a gated community. He had even made a name for himself. His wealth was unimaginable.

In the first century, it was often thought that wealth and success was a sign of blessing – a sign of God's favor. Since Deuteronomy seemed to imply that these two things went hand-in-hand, a little "Jewish prosperity gospel of sorts" developed. And the Pharisees, Luke tells us, were lovers of money. Chances are, they were the ones who held this belief most fully.

Our parable from Luke 16 follows another parable – the parable of the dishonest manager. That previous story ends with the counsel that "Whoever is faithful in a very

little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much...You cannot serve God and money.” (Luke 16:10, 13) With our parable this morning following on the heels of that instruction, it would seem like this parable is going to say something about wealth. In fact, some have even suggested that Chapter 16 could be called “Rich Men and Lovers of Money.”ⁱⁱ

But, I don’t think that’s what this parable is about. And that’s a good thing because none of us think we are rich. Since we don’t think we are rich, we are likely to think that this we can tune out instructions directed to lovers of money. We don’t think we are wealthy because, no matter how much we have, it’s not hard to find someone who has more. Jeff Bezos, Warren Buffett, Bill Gates...they all make more money in one hour than most of us make all year. Patrick Mahomes, the quarterback for the Kansas City Chiefs, just signed a deal worth \$503 million dollars. Even a NBA rookie making the league minimum is bringing home just shy of \$900,000 each season. Because this is more than most of us (maybe all of us) make, we don’t think of ourselves as rich. As such, nearly all of us in hearing this parable think we better identify with the poor man.

Just as Jesus paints the picture of a rich man who had everything, he also sketches with fine detail the picture of the poor man. He sleeps on the ground outside the rich man’s compound. Perhaps better translated, he is “thrown down,” unceremoniously dumped at the gate.ⁱⁱⁱ He’s not covered by fine fabrics but is covered in sores that the stray dogs come and lick. This marks him as unclean. And he is hungry – so hungry. He longs for the scraps that the dogs get – the bread that, at feasts, was used to wipe the grease off of one’s hands and then thrown on the floor. His poverty was unimaginable. He was the Eleanor Rigby of his time. You know the line in this famous Beatles hit:

Eleanor Rigby
Died in the church and was buried along with her name
Nobody came...

*All the lonely people
Where do they all come from?
All the lonely people
Where do they all belong?*

This lonely poor man in the parable, who didn't belong inside the gate, died...and I suspect no one came. No one cared that Lazarus was dead. But this is where the reversal begins – where the rich man and the poor man “trade places.” Lazarus, the poor man finds himself in the bosom of Abraham – in the heart and in close relationship with Father Abraham. In the afterlife, he seemingly has everything. Meanwhile, the rich man also dies, and he finds himself in Hades where he is tormented. The man once draped in luxury is now wrapped about by flames. Suddenly, he owns nothing but misery.

Even though Lazarus and the Rich Man found themselves in different places, some things don't change. Even in the throes of Hades, the rich man looked down his nose, still seeing Lazarus as “less than.” He asked Abraham to send “his water boy” Lazarus to him so that that he might be of service to him, bringing him water to cool his raging tongue. And as we heard in the scripture a moment ago, Abraham – who, even though they were separated, still referred to – still identified - the rich man as a child – told him that this wasn't possible.

But this reality didn't change how the rich man saw Lazarus. So he tried again, crying out to Father Abraham to send his errand boy, Lazarus, to the rich man's brothers. He suggested that Lazarus could warn them so that they wouldn't end up in this place of torment. Again, Abraham told him this wouldn't happen. “They have Moses and the prophets.” In other words, they have scripture. They have the instructions of the law and the warnings of the prophets. “They should listen to them.”
(v. 29)

Despite being turned down twice – perhaps a new occurrence for the rich man – he makes one last-gasp appeal. “Father, if Lazarus” – who is dead – “goes to see them, they will repent.” But Abraham remained unconvinced. “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.” (v. 31)

It’s at this point that we’re beginning to get the picture of why this isn’t a parable about wealth and poverty...at least not directly. The brothers of the Rich Man had the law and the prophets. They should have known better. And, if they won’t listen to the living voices of Scripture, neither will they listen to a dead man like Lazarus who will say to them the exact same thing.

And, by the same token, we should know better, too. Do we listen to Moses and the prophets? Or are we self-selective, choosing those passages that offer comfort to us in our comfortable lifestyles? Even more so, do we listen to the whole counsel of scripture including the New Testament, which speaks of how God saw fit to send a man from the dead to awaken us? We have been given the law and the prophets, as well as the teachings of Jesus and his apostles, to direct us to care for the needs of our neighbor. And, yet, a battle is still taking place. A battle for who will be the lord of our lives.

As I said a few moments ago, I don’t think this parable is directly about wealth, but we do have to address it. Even if we don’t identify with the rich man – even if we are buying clothes off the rack, eating ordinary grub, and stretching to make it to the end of the month, we still find ourselves wealthy by world standards. If you are a family of four making the Wichita Falls median income of \$45,000, this puts you in the top 12% of wealth globally.^{iv} And if your same family of four has a combined income of \$100,000, this places you in the top 3% of wealth globally.^v Given this global perspective, nearly all of us are much closer to the rich man than to Lazarus.

George Buttrick, the well-known preacher, author, and lecturer of the last century, points out, though, that the lesson of this parable is about more than money. He wrote:

The story offers no support to the glib assumption that the Rich man would have fulfilled all duty had he dressed Lazarus' sores and fed his hunger. True charity is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it is not spasmodic or superficial. Ameliorations such as food and medicine are necessary, but there is a more fundamental neighborliness.^{vi}

If there is one thing we have lost in the last few years, it's that idea of fundamental neighborliness. We've lost the notion that we are our brother's keeper/our sister's keeper. We've lost the fact that we are all in this together – that if Jesus is the Lord of our lives, that I bear some responsibility for people other than me; that you bear some responsibility for people other than you.

So, let's start to correct this. If you are here in the Sanctuary this morning, look around. Who is here that you have not connected with? Who is here that you don't know? Who do you see that you don't regularly engage with because their socioeconomic status is different from yours? And if you are at home, look out the window. Who do you see that needs help? The new neighbor moving in across the street? The single mom next door? The octogenarian three houses down who just lost his wife? Do you even know their names?

It turns out our parable this morning is the only parable of Jesus in which a proper name is used. In every other parable Jesus tells, the characters are identified by other attributes: a wealthy landowner, a servant, a certain man, a Pharisee, and others. But, in this parable, the poor man is identified as Lazarus, which means "helped by God." And despite the fact he acted otherwise, the rich man knew Lazarus by name.

What that means is that being a neighbor is about more than just knowing a name. It's about recognizing their value. It's about meeting the austere needs of another instead of adding another luxurious want for yourself. As Lutheran pastor Brian Stoffregan notes, "To free Lazarus from hunger, you provide food. To free him from disease, you provide doctors and medicine. To free him from the elements, you provide clothing and shelter."^{vii} And we could add, to free Lazarus from obscurity, you provide connection. To free him from stress, you provide assistance for the burdensome demands of his life. To free him from loneliness, you provide genuine companionship. We do these things to free us from selfish greed and uncaring attitudes. We do these things because that's what Jesus Christ – and all of scripture – tells us to do.

For the last three weeks, we have wrestled with parables that, just as they did 2,000 years ago, speak a word to us in the situation we find ourselves in today. The question is: having been jolted from our blithe sense of invincibility by this pandemic, will our lives change in any appreciable way? Will this disruption in our lives wake us up to what and who is really driving our lives? Will we choose our comfort over the Comforter? Will we choose our pocketbooks over the Prince of Peace? Will we choose luxury over our Lord? All I can tell you to do is choose wisely. Your very soul might depend on it.

ⁱ Hoezee, Scott. "Luke 16:19-31" in The Center for Excellence in Preaching, September 23, 2019. https://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/proper-21c-2/?type=the_lectionary_gospel

ⁱⁱ Culpepper, R. Alan. "Luke" in *The New Interpreters Bible Commentary*, Vol. IX. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995.

ⁱⁱⁱ Petty, John C. "Lectionary Blogging: Luke 16:19-31" in Progressive Involvement. September 20, 2010. https://www.progressiveinvolvement.com/progressive_involvement/2010/09/lectionary-blogging-luke-16-19-31.html

^{iv} Statistic from "How Rich Am I" in *Giving What We Can*. Accessed September 5, 2020. <https://howrichami.givingwhatwecan.org/how-rich-am-i?income=45000&countryCode=USA&household%5Badults%5D=2&household%5Bchildren%5D=2>

^v Statistic from "How Rich Am I" in *Giving What We Can*. Accessed September 5, 2020. <https://howrichami.givingwhatwecan.org/how-rich-am-i?income=100000&countryCode=USA&household%5Badults%5D=2&household%5Bchildren%5D=2>

^{vi} Buttrick, George as quoted in Stoffregan, Brian. "Exegetical Notes: Luke 16:19-31" in *CrossMarks*. <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/luke16x19.htm>

^{vii} Stoffregan.