

"Where is Your Heart?"
Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Season of Pentecost, Sunday, September 26, 2010
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Texts: Luke 16:19-31

The Rich Man and Lazarus

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.’ ”

WoulDa CloulDa ShoulDa

The scripture for today is the parable of the rich man and Lazarus,
a passage that lends itself very easily to a communal Bible study
how the rich man looked back with regret on what he should have done.

We might talk about Monday morning quarterbacking,
about playing the game of 20-20 hindsight,
living with woulDa, coulDa, shoulDa.

One of my favorite preachers said that some of his best sermons
were written in his mind on the way home from church.

"Oh! This is what I should have said..."

The rich man looked back from his vantage point in Hades.
Oh, this is what I should have done.

Michael Crichton wrote a little book called "Terminal Man,"

a book about the relationship between mental disorders and violence.
Crichton knows today that his hypothesis when he wrote it was wrong.
He wrote it over thirty years ago,
and today would really prefer that it not go to print.
Since Crichton can't prevent the book's publication,
he's added a disclaimer and an apology in the new introduction.
We can't undo the past, yet we can seek to address past wrongs or errors.
Yes, there is a valid sermon and study here in this text
about the grace and wisdom God provides
which enables us to learn from our mistakes,
to move into new days and new opportunities
a little bit smarter, more generous and more disciplined.

Or we take a risk, dig deeper into the scriptures,
and dare to consider the theme that may cut us to the quick.

Jesus tells a parable about two men
who are separated in life by the walls built by the rich man;
in death their fortunes are reversed
as the poor man goes to heaven
and the rich man goes to Hades.

They are separated by chasms as deep and wide
as the rich man's walls were high.

This is a parable about an unnamed man
who refused to be a neighbor in life.

When he died and found himself far from heaven's pearly gates,
he sought to find a way to warn his five brothers of their future fates.

They were just like him.

Did the brothers get the message?

If so, what did they learn?

What message do they - and we -- need to receive?

In the film "One True Thing," Kate becomes ill with cancer.

Her husband, George, insists that their daughter, Ellen,
come home to take care of her.

Ellen, who barely tolerates her mother's Martha Stewartish enthusiasms
and "Hints from Helloise" approach to life,
protests that she has a demanding career...

Her father lays it on thick.

"You got a Harvard education, but where is your heart?"¹

Where is your heart?

The essence of the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus

is not that the Rich Man is rich;

it is not that he has many material things;

it is not that he is clothed in purple

and feasts sumptuously everyday

and washes his hands with bread that he then throws to the dogs,

all the while Lazarus begs and bleeds and dies at his gate.

The essence of Jesus' message is not that he has gained wealth;

it is that he has lost his heart.

The longest journey in the world isn't to the top of Mt. Everest

or the depths of the Pacific Ocean;

it is the one foot that separates and connects our heart with our head,

our faith with our reason, our passion with persona.

Where is his heart? What happened to the journey from head to heart?

The Rich Man does not care; he has no compassion.

He does not know that the beggar has a name.

He does not see the poor at his gate

nor does he listen to the cries of the oppressed.

He may consider himself religious or a spiritual being;

yet he does not heed the Word of God.

Jesus offers us some most disturbing words of warning:

If we do not listen to Moses and the prophets,

neither will we listen if someone were to come back from the dead.

Will we listen to Moses?

In Deuteronomy 15:7, Moses said:

"Do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor."

Will we listen to the prophets?

In Isaiah 58:6-7, the prophet proclaimed:

"Is not this the fast I choose:

to loose the bonds of injustice,

to undo the thongs of the yoke,

1 Daphne Merkin, The New Yorker, 9-28-98, P. 104.

*to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?"*

In *Letters from Children to God*, a child offered this prayer:

*"Dear Lord,
Will my father get into heaven
if he continues to use his bowling words around the house?"*

And we are invited to ask ourselves and to ask the Lord in prayer:

*Dear Lord, will we get into heaven
if we distance ourselves from one another,
if we do not act on your Biblical message
about what it means to love our neighbor as ourselves.*

Where are our hearts?

As Jesus tells the parable, he emphasizes that Lazarus has a name.

The hungry in our midst have names,
and their names may sound like Joseph and Mary,
Calvin and Shamika, Olga and Alphonso.

We all hunger, in one way or another;

we are all broken and in need of the gracious healing
that comes from the helping, feeding hand of a friend who acts for God.

Vanderbilt's George Buttrick listened to this parable

and observed that as important as it is to share food,
the parable is about an even deeper and more pervasive attitude,
an attitude of neighborliness toward others:

Buttrick said:

*"The story offers no support to the 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."*

*"Fundamental neighborliness," therefore, is the barometer of the soul,
an indication of the attitude of one's heart
that is prized in the sight of God."*²

A neighbor is one whom God expects us to love.
We are connected by six degrees of separation.
When you meet a total stranger, chances are that
you know someone who knows someone who knows someone
who knows someone who knows someone who knows
the stranger in your midst.

No matter how wide the chasms we dig or how high the walls we build,
we are all connected to one another on this blue planet spinning in the sky,
bonded together by the saving, redeeming, transforming love of God.

Where is your heart?
So the rich man looks back.
He might play the woulda coulda shoulda game.
If only I had invited Lazarus to my Table,
just as Christ invites me to the Table.
If only I could tell my family and friends, my brothers and sisters
what I know now... that a neighbor is one whom God expects us to love.
Did the brothers get the message? Do we?!
Do we listen to wisdom and warnings?
Shall we heed what we hear? Make the journey from head to heart ?
Will we make room at the table and follow Jesus on the way to the Cross?

Will Willimon tells the following story.

"...When I was serving a little church in rural Georgia,
one of my members had a relative who died,
and Patsy and I went to the funeral as a show of support for the family.
The funeral was in a little, hot, crowded off-brand Baptist country church.
Well, I had never seen anything like it.
They wheeled the coffin in, the preacher began to preach.
He shouted, fumed, flayed his arms.
"It's too late for Joe," he screamed.
"He might have wanted to do this or that in life, but it's too late for him now."

He's dead. It's all over for him.

He might have wanted to straighten his life out, but he cant now. It's over."

What a comfort this must be to the family, I thought.

"But it ain't too late for you. People drop dead everyday.

So why wait? Now is the time for decision.

Now is the time to make your life count for something.

Give your life to Jesus."

Well it was the worst thing I ever heard.

"Can you imagine a preacher doing that kind of thing to a grieving family?"

I asked Patsy on the way home.

"I've never heard something so manipulative, cheap, and inappropriate.

I would never preach a sermon like that," I said.

She agreed. She agreed it was tacky and manipulative, calloused.

"Of course," she added, *"The worst part of all is that what he said was true."*

It is never too early and it is never too late

to love the Lord your God

with all your heart, all your strength, all your mind, and all your soul,
and to love your neighbor as yourself.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.