

## ***“The Barometer of the Soul”***

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, September 30, 2007

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Holy Scriptures: Luke 16:19-31

### **Luke 16:19-31**

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 looked up 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, father, I beg you 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 goes to them from the dead, 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.” ’

One September when my family lived in Jackson, Tennessee  
there was a difficult time when our fair city  
was filled with violence and rumors of violence.

An article in the local newspaper said there would be a  
ministers meeting on Labor Day

to discuss gang violence and to seek plausible  
solutions.

Later the meeting invitation was expanded to include all  
citizens in the city.

To be perfectly honest, I was hesitant about going.

I certainly didn't feel like going.

Who would want to go to yet another meeting and on Labor  
Day at 6:30pm?

I figured maybe the same 10-12 people would be present,  
the same folks I saw at similar types of gatherings.

Sometimes it is good to be proven wrong.

The gathering had to be moved into a larger space because 350 people showed up.

We were seated in circles of chairs, in groups of ten.

We were asked to come up with two solutions

to rising crime and gang violence in Jackson.

In my small group a young man, age 29, began to speak.

We'll call him Mark.

Mark said that he grew up in Chicago, and that he did not receive any love in his home.

So he joined a gang called the Disciples.

As a Disciple he found the belonging he missed at home.

Mark rose in the gang to be a right-hand man of one of the leaders.

The gang leader became a heroin addict and soon Mark was an addict, too.

Mark was in the gang for many years when one day someone he trusted

who was not a gangbanger said, *"This is how other people see you."*

And he picked up a handful of dirt.

*"People think you are nothing but dirt and they treat you accordingly."*

Then he showed Mark a Bible.

*"And this is how God sees you:*

*God loves you and wants you to stop hurting yourself*

*and other people.”*

He showed Mark the love of Christ  
and in the love of Christ

Mark found a way out of a hellish existence.

Mark left the Disciples gang and became a disciple of Jesus Christ.

As he told the story he said that he was 29 years old and had been out for 5 years.

Mark said, *“Now I have two young sons. I don't want them to be in a gang.”*

He so desperately wants his sons to know God,  
to love God, and to know that God loves them through him.

So he tells them his story, shares with them his wisdom,  
and in doing so passes on what he has learned from life to his children  
and to any who will make the time and effort to listen.

Praise God that one who neglected and abused his neighbors as a way of life

now recognizes and respects his neighbors,  
all because a child of God lovingly showed him the difference

between a handful of dirt and the handiwork of God.

In the Gospel of Luke Jesus of Nazareth 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 either refused or was confused about how 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.

We are left with more questions than answers.

Did the brothers get the message?

Who told them and what was said?

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?” [i]*

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?

Our friend Jack Snellgrove, who pastored here in Atlanta and Georgia for many years,

is now retiring, reflecting and serving Christ nearer the sea.

In a recent correspondence he shares:

*“This next week’s text (Rich Man and Lazarus)*

*touches the “heaven and hell” issue again.*

*Once again, I think the main point of the parable*

*is to not worry about the outcome of the future,*

*but do everything now  
that forwards a future  
for those who are in need,  
and to know that God is in charge of the future!*  
I remain convinced that Jesus had little regard for an eternal home  
that is rooted in egotism and individual rewards.  
I think that Jesus loved as God loves,  
that is, loving us so much  
that God is willing to give of the best God has  
in order for those God loves  
to live in peace and harmony, health and  
wholeness.”

Jacks Snellgrove adds:

*“Strange things happen when you age:  
you don't worry near as much about self  
as you do about those you love.*

*Richard Rohr calls this “second half of life” spirituality.”*

Thanks, Jack. I needed to hear your wisdom:

*“Do everything now  
that forwards a future  
for those who are in need,  
and...know that God is in charge of the future!*

This is a word of wisdom from one whose corners are honed.

This is good advice.

Gil Scott Heron sang, *Good advice is sure enough hard to come by*

*Bad advice surrounds you constantly*

*Good advice you just can't put no price on*

*Bad advice is easy cus it's free*

(Lyrics from "Under the Hammer")

Have you ever been given advice that you chose to ignore,  
a choice you later regretted?

Have you ever been given good counsel which you followed,  
and were glad afterward?

When I was preparing to preside at my first wedding,  
I approached my senior minister and staff supervisor Michael Mooty  
and asked him for advice on how to handle premarital counseling  
sessions.

Dr. Michael Mooty walked me through the process  
and gave me a list of subjects to cover with the excited couple.

He also suggested a homework assignment for the couple.

Michael Mooty said for them to identify the marriages of people they know  
which they admire and respect.

They are to approach one or two of these married couples  
and set up a time to visit.

They are to ask  
what advice or lessons would the married folks give to a couple  
anticipating their own lifelong commitment.

Then, if the newlyweds so choose,  
they could bring back to our next session the list of lessons they heard.

My friends, this was excellent wisdom from a former pastoral supervisor;



I have followed and adapted his outline and lessons for these past 25 years. Moreover, around 85 couples since then have been given this very same assignment. The homework has often turned out to be a highlight of our shared learning.

Have you learned some lessons in life

that you need to pass on to someone else?

Is there something you have gleaned through experience

that might help another soul?

In the parable Jesus suggests to his listeners that

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 the wisdom of Moses?

In Deuteronomy 15:7, Moses said:

*“Do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor.”*

Will we listen to the wisdom of 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,*

*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?"*

Will we listen to the wisdom of children in our midst?

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?"*

Will we listen to the wisdom stored and sometimes covered up in our hearts?

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 Divinity School'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.

George 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.”* [\[ii\]](#)

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 a 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 every day.*

*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.”*

There’s no reason to live your life looking back thinking of your woulda coulda shouldas.

The Good News is that it’s never too early and it’s never too late

to receive the advice and pass it on

that we are 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.*

[i] Daphne Merkin, The New Yorker, 9-28-98, P. 104.

[ii] New Interpreter's Bible: Luke, Page 320.