

LUKE 16: 19-31

**Proper 21 Year C
September 30, 2007
The Rev. Joy Prater**

I need to confess that before I began working on the sermon for this week...I was not all that familiar with the story that we just heard. Of course...I had HEARD the story...but I hadn't given it a lot of thought or study. After struggling with the meaning of this parable...I found myself wishing that I had given Seamus ANOTHER date for me to stand here...because THIS particular scripture actually gives me goose bumps...it's frightening...and I think that there's just NO WAY that I...nor anyone...can ignore what is being said.

This week...I learned that Lazarus is the only character who was given a name by Jesus when telling his parables to the Pharisees. We should know, too...that this Lazarus is not at all related to the other Lazarus who returned from the dead...though the Hebrew meaning of the name is "*God has helped*"...so it does seem fitting for both characters.

We're told that Lazarus is worse than "poor"...he's a beggar...he has no home, no food, no friends... he has NOTHING. He just lies there day after day and waits for the rich man to come out of his gate and throw some crumbs to keep him alive...provided that the dogs don't get to them first. To include the part about the dogs licking his sores...was even MORE proof of the low social status of Lazarus. And...we learn that the rich man wears PURPLE...and fine linens...which symbolized much wealth in those days...maybe even royalty. The rich man is also described as eating sumptuously EVERY day...not just on holidays. We ALL know from our history classes that in those days...to be wealthy was EVERYTHING...and that the worst fate for anyone was to be labeled a beggar...to be homeless...to be sick and helpless and alone. In my mind...it was easy to picture these scenes...but as I continued to read the thoughts and explanations of other preachers & authors...some of them describe in ghastly detail how the dogs licked Lazarus' wounds over and over...cleaning the pus from the sores...

THEN the picture became disgusting to me...not only because of the dogs, but because of the pain that Lazarus endured day after day...waiting and wishing that someone would just SEE him.

I began to picture the rich man as ALL OF US...all of the contemporary world...but with no particular face. Not MEAN people...not SELFISH people...not UNHAPPY people. ALL OF US...who are very busy with our own lives...stressed about our jobs...or worried about money...and swallowed up by the responsibilities we assume. We ARE generous people...we GIVE to others...we may walk quickly past the bell ringers when we put change into the Salvation Army kettle at Christmas...but we DO put in some money...at their door...we drop off old clothes that we don't need...for the women at Sanctuary....and though we don't know who they are...we mark an "X" in the box on our electric bill...so a dollar will be added to our total, to help an older or disabled person. We go to church regularly...we greet people as we share the peace...we pledge some of our money, and we even give EXTRA to help with special needs. Like the rich man in the story....we are GOOD Christians...we're proud of what we have earned for ourselves in our lives...and we really do BELIEVE that we DESERVE what we have accomplished.

Next...still picturing the scenes in the parable...Lazarus became a woman that I once knew...who walked the streets of Harrison for several years. Of course, she came to Share & Care daily...and after so long of a time...we began to "shoo" her away...to tell her to come back another day. She wasn't homeless...she just CHOSE to walk the streets...day and night...over and over...around and around. She never walked with anyone...and as far as we knew, she had no friends or family. Many times, I would find her in the dumpster at night or on weekends when I was working late, and I would tell her to get out and be on her way. EVERY time she came up to the building...she would get ALL the cigarette butts out of the ash can...and carefully put them into her purse or light one and smoke it while standing there. THIS Lazarus person was named Linda. She never did tell us her last name...and she would just give a hateful "go to hell" look whenever we asked any questions of her.

So...when Linda came every day...no questions...we just gave her food and maybe some clothes or a blanket or a can opener if she asked. She must've hung around our place for more than 3 – 4 years...the time just seems to run together now.

One day I got a call from the County Judge...telling me that Linda had been found dead in her apartment...wanting to know if we had ANY information on her. As long as we had known Linda...we had nothing other than her name. Weeks and months went by...and I got another call from the Judge...this time asking me to come to the cemetery and say some “words” while Linda’s remains were buried in the “pauper’s field”. I did that...it was one of the emptiest things I have ever done...and I felt a heaviness surrounding me for a long time after that day. Since that first time...I have had two other opportunities to say prayers for people who remained nameless...and it is something that I will never forget. For me...Lazarus has a face now...

In Luke’s story...the rich man dies...and Lazarus dies...just as ALL of us will die someday. The NEXT part is the scary thing...the description of what can only be HEAVEN and HELL. Lazarus is described as resting his head on Abraham’s bosom...for all eternity...but rich man is suffering terribly...can’t get out...and doesn’t understand why. HE’s not used to this kind of treatment...he even kindly asks Abraham to send Lazarus across the big “divide”...to bring him something to cool his parched lips. But rich man is told that since he was so comfortable and so proud of all of his “things” in his life...he was now going to see what it’s like to be Lazarus. Rich man is reminded that Lazarus had nothing in his earthly life but suffering...and that he was now going to rest in true peace and love. So, finally...in his pain...rich man begs for Abraham to send Lazarus across the big divide...to take a message to his brothers on earth...so that they can “clean up their act” right now...before THEY die. But...rich man is reminded once again...that if we haven’t heard it and listened to it when we had the chance during our lifetime....it’s SURE too late for us after we’re gone from the earth. The brothers would have to listen and believe on their own...how they should live their lives and spend their time following what Christ taught. We finally heard that rich man spent eternity helplessly watching over the big “divide”...suffering without ceasing...as Lazarus slept on in peace.

Now...I can honestly say that this story made me so uncomfortable that I was squirming in my seat all week...as I really heard and FELT the message! THIS is a message that really jumps out at ALL of us...grabbing us by our conscience!

I shared a story with you one time about a woman who comes to Share & Care for help...and who also volunteers in our program. SHE, like Lazarus...is poor...pretty dirty...and actually DOES beg for things that she sees while working in our building. Believe it or not...she is ALSO covered in sores....sometimes open sores...but unlike Lazarus...there aren't any dogs waiting beside her. For me again...Lazarus is a woman...named Helen...who tries to help...but mostly gets in the way. We give her menial tasks...like bagging potatoes or rice...or maybe baby diapers. She does all this in the pantry....alone....because that's just the way it is for her. Not long ago, one of our other volunteers came to work early enough to be ready before the doors opened for the day....and he worked awhile in the same room as Helen....and she talked to him and talked to him...about nothing, really...just talk. After a short time had passed...he came out and asked us to move her from the pantry, because he just didn't want to be there with her...after all...SHE was hard to look at! Reluctantly, one of the staff members went along with him...and moved her out to the warehouse in a corner by the freezer. He set up her table...brought her "things"...and told her that she would have more room out there rather than being cooped up in the pantry. I HATE TELLING THIS STORY about the terrible thing we did that day...but I'm doing it to emphasize what Luke is telling us in the Gospel. In our OWN lives...most of us are far more like the rich than the poor...WE ARE ALL the rich man! In fairness to us...there's nothing wrong with having fine clothes, good food, nice homes and cars. And...it's only by the grace of God that we live in the most prosperous and fair nation on earth. But when we become complacent...comfortable...we grow less and less sensitive to the needs of others...and compassion takes on a smaller and smaller role in our life.

In the eyes of Christ, Lazarus was obviously not the sinner that his society saw...and rich man was put into a situation where he had to confront his OWN sinfulness....so what does that say about US? After we are humbled...after we have tripped over our own sinfulness...what do we do? Is there anything that we CAN do?

This parable isn't just another story about money and wealth and what we should do with it. This is about our ATTITUDES and ACTIONS. What have WE done for Lazarus? Have WE thrown some crumbs from our own stash...and then felt good because we have done good works? Have WE become accustomed to seeing Lazarus...but thinking that he should just get up and go to work like we do...to earn his OWN keep...so that we can go about earning and saving more of ours? After reading this story so many times, I am convinced that many of us fall into this category, without even realizing it.

I want to read to you a little story that I ran across last week...you may have heard it before..."**There was once a person who spoke with the Lord about heaven and hell. The Lord said to this person, "Come I will SHOW you what hell is like." They entered a room where a group of people sat at a table around a huge pot of stew. Each person there held their own spoon that reached the pot...but each spoon had a handle much longer than their own arm. Their spoons were so large that they were unable to get the stew into their own mouths. The suffering as you can imagine was terrible. 'Come, now I will show you heaven,' the Lord said. They entered another room, identical to the first. There was the pot of stew, the group of people, and the same long handled spoons. Something, however was different here in heaven. Here everyone was happy and talking and well nourished. "I don't understand," said the person. "Why are they happy here in Heaven when they are so miserable in the other room where everything is just the same?" The Lord smiled at the person and replied, "Well, the reason is simple...here in heaven they have learned how to feed each other."**

There IS no final grace...no last minute pardon in this parable for the privileged, entitled, rich man...but we can hear some good news in it for us: WE are still living...so we are still able to get free of our own selves. WE can still hear Moses and the prophets. WE can still listen to Jesus. WE can still help each other...to love being the human creatures that we are...and to aspire to being better and better. There's no second chance for the man in the story...but there CAN be for us.

We might just resemble rich man more than we would like...but the God who makes the sun shine on the wicked and the self-indulgent...as well as on the good and the eager...is more than willing to disregard our ignorance of our own human condition...revealing to us God's profound and un-earned mercy. From the One who made us...there is courage, grace and healing at every turn...and Jesus promises that it will NOT be denied to the humble...searching...contrite...and broken heart.

So...it IS possible. We have the Holy Spirit...we have our church's ancient traditions of grace...which to us is prayer, sacrament, song, & service. And we have God's Word. And we have each other. And we have today. AMEN.