

The Church of the Pilgrimage
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Luke 16:19-31

“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores. “The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’ “But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’ “He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’ “Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’ “No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’ “He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

Getting It

Jesus told lots of parables, but this is the only one he told where people have *names*. Lazaurus, the poor man. Abraham, the father of the faith, who greets Lazarus on the other side, holding him to his breast. And Dives, “Dives” meaning rich man in the Latin vulgate. So actually, the rich man doesn’t have a specific name. And maybe that’s on purpose – He could really be so many people.

Let’s begin with him. There he is in the afterlife, he’s getting his reward, and he asks Father Abraham to fetch Lazarus for him -- not once, but three times. Have him bring me some water to relieve my thirst. Have him warn my siblings, my five siblings, so they won’t come to this torment. Have him go in person, they will believe someone who has come to them in person. Someone has wondered if perhaps Lazarus was formerly a servant in the rich man’s home, only when the sores broke out he was “let go”. (*Provoking the Gospel, Swanson, p. 204*) This, you see, might account for why the rich man feels he can call on Abraham to summon Lazarus for all manner of help.

Did you notice that part? Though the tables have been turned in the afterlife, the rich man is still functioning as if he’s in control. Call my servant please. Call Lazarus to help, to intervene. *He, the rich man, doesn’t yet get it.* A judgment has been issued, but he is still clinging to his old power and prestige.

I see this parable of Jesus today through the lens of our recent midweek Lenten gathering.

Last Wednesday night some of us gathered to share a meal and discussion of *Under Our Skin* by Ben Watson. Ben Watson, a professional football player formerly with the New England Patriots, wrote a moving Facebook post in response to the Ferguson verdict, which later, upon many people's urgings, he turned into the book *Under our Skin*.

After taking a moment to speak with each other in small groups about the first time in our lives when we realized there was advantage or disadvantage given our own skin color the question was asked "What was the biggest learning for you in reading this book?" Someone quickly said – "how different my experience is, especially as it relates to the police." "When I was young," this person said, "my parents encouraged me, if I were ever in trouble, to find a policeman, that they would always help me out. I took that to heart, have always believed it. Reading this book I can see how that is not everyone's experience."

We spoke of what a fine story teller Ben Watson was. How, as he spoke of his family growing up, of his experiences in school, in friendships, in playing football, he offered up his story, a set of experiences plainly and honestly told. And here's the general rub of the book: Though under our skin we are all the same, we all have hearts that beat, and pulses that move, and hopes that lay within hopes for ourselves, our families, our community and our world. We are not all the same in the way we experience our society, shaped as it is by white privilege. Watson had a best friend who had a huge confederate flag decorating the wall of his bedroom. Watson had to explain to him why for him that flag was offensive. Watson was stopped one night driving while black when he was taking his wife to the hospital to deliver her first baby. The book is full of memorable incidents like that.

Why is it so hard for us to know what is going on for someone else, to understand a reality that is different from our own? Why do teachers like Ben Watson, or Martin Luther King, Jr, or Jesus for that matter, have to work so hard to help us see? Watson's book and Jesus parable point up this universal truth: We walk in the shoes we walk in, and sometimes it limits our sight so we can't really see how it is for others. So it is in the parable: While Lazarus has been lying at the rich man's gate, his sores being licked by the dogs, the rich man hasn't really been seeing him. It is not so much the wealth that is the problem, it is the accompanying attitudes. It is important to our understanding of this parable to remember who Jesus was telling it to, or rather who he was telling it *for*. Jesus has been teaching about money, about how a person cannot serve both God and money, and the Pharisees response was to reject these teachings. They felt he was making too much of money's corrupting power. One could be faithful and have riches. In fact, the Pharisees believed that if you had your health, you were blessed by God, and if you had riches, you were doubly blessed. It worked backwards too – if you had your health and you were rich, well then you must be obeying God's commandments – you must be righteous -- because these things, health and cash, they are God's reward.

So Jesus tells a story –remember what I said last week, about parables being meant to mess with our minds – Jesus tells a story to turn that idea, the idea that God rewards you if you are faithful, that riches equals God’s stamp of approval -- to turn that idea on its head. In fact, Jesus gives the prophetic message – that what people take for glory is categorically to our disadvantage. He’s speaking like Isaiah, who said to those in positions of power, to those who were exploiting others

Since you serve your own interest only on your fast day and make all your men work the harder, Since our fasting (your religiosity) leads only to wrangling and strife, and dealing vicious blows with the fist, On such a day you are keeping no fast that will carry your cries to heaven...

Is this not is required of you as a fast: to loose the fetters of injustice, to untie the knots of the yoke, to snap every yoke, to set free those who have been crushed? Is it not sharing your food with the hungry, taking the homeless poor into your house, clothing the naked when you meet them, and never evading your duty to your kinsfolk?

Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and soon you will grow healthy like a wound newly healed. Your own righteousness will be your vanguard, and the glory of the Lord your rearguard. Then, if you cry, the Lord will answer; If you cry to God, God will say “Here I am.” (Isaiah 58, The New English Bible)

Soon “you will grow healthy like a wound newly healed.” What powerful language. And what a powerful parable. See, poverty like Lazarus was experiencing, poverty like so many experience, is violence Like racism, it is violence to the soul. As Isaiah says, we cannot come to worship turning a blind eye to such violence.

The Pharisees of course aren’t stupid. They know their scripture. They know the law. They know they are suppose to care for the needy, that the law of Moses says they are to share the harvest with the poor and transient. (Leviticus 19:9-10). But somehow they’ve stopped locating God as a living reality. They’ve made God and God’s laws a sort of frozen concept, as if knowing *about* God and God’s law is enough --like knowing your grade school history lessons, but it doesn’t have much impact on your life. In the stunning parable Jesus tells, Jesus questions a theology that seems so unquestioning of wealth, and its capacity to lull us into heedless self-absorption. He questions a theology and a way of living that doesn’t take into account a fellow child of God who is lying by the gate.

Though the parable Jesus tells has afterlife imagery in it, though it speaks of heaven and hell, it is first and foremost a parable for now. Jesus told this parable for the Pharisees, who needed to consider some story lines other than their own. For the Pharisees, who had gotten overly smug about who was in and who was out, and what was required of them as people of faith. Likewise, the parable is told not so much for the purpose of where Dives, the rich man, winds up but for the purpose of

how we are living our lives now. We are the five siblings, the ones that the rich man pleads for. Just as there was still time for the Pharisees, there is still time for us. And there is still time for the church. I think in many ways last Wednesday night we did a brave thing. We talked about race, a subject that many people find difficult, awkward, tense. What if here in our church we also talked also about money, and about our tendency to value not only ourselves, but also others, around how much money they make? We know this is decidedly not a Christian value, and yet we do it anyway. Our culture has seeped in, these attitudes have a hold on us, in the same way, that if we are honest, white privilege has a hold on us. What if we spoke honestly about our fears, about our changing world, about how chaotic everything seems, and found a way to graciously admit our unearned privilege, admit too how it (our privilege, our wealth) really doesn't protect us from being vulnerable, from being mortal? What if we could come to see how these attitudes we have only serve to separate us, which is an indicator of sin?

At bible study this week I asked how this parable challenges us. It challenged one woman to live more simply. To live well, she said, with less. It challenges me to get myself over to Monday meals, something I try to do now the then, not just to talk with our church members in the kitchen, as I often do, but to sit at a table and listen to the stories of some of our guests. The parable makes me realize that more than I'd like I've bought into our cultures way of associating mostly with people just like ourselves, for me, those who are probably more worried about getting old and will their money hold out than about where their next meal is coming from. There are people at Monday Meals whose names I once knew, but it has been way too long since I've had a conversation with them.

How does this parable challenge you? Can you let it have its way with you, leading you to reflect on how you're living now?

And what of our church? What of those of us who strive to follow Jesus here in this place?

What if we gave ourselves over to the heart of the gospel as Jesus portrays it: Strong in the conviction that how we treat the poor is perhaps the best indicator of our spiritual health, Strong in the conviction that God embraces not just some, but all of Gods creation, and that what makes a church an awesome church, a truly vital church is the extent to which we live love -- God's love *for all* of God's children.

For far better than living in fear of the chasm is working to bridge it.

Amen.

