

Text: Luke 16:19-31 (NRSV)

16:19 "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day.

16:20 And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores,

16:21 who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores.

16:22 The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried.

16:23 In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side.

16:24 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.'

16:25 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.'

16:26 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.'

16:27 He said, 'Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house--

16:28 for I have five brothers--that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.'

16:29 Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.'

16:30 He said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.'

16:31 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.'"

This is a stark section of scripture. The imagery stands out. So much so, that it's the first Bible Story I can remember learning about. Preschool through Kindergarten, I attended a private school at a Wesleyan Church. I remember each day in Kindergarten beginning with a Bible story. So, there were a lot of Bible stories during that school year. Out of all of the stories that we heard that year, this is the one that I can specifically pinpoint.

The room was at the end of the hall, next door to the kindergarten classroom. It's where we listened to Bible stories every morning, seated on the floor, the teacher in a chair, showing us those classic, old school Bible story pictures. I can vividly remember the picture that showed Lazarus up here in the top right corner, his face weathered, but serene and relaxed.

The rich man was down here in the bottom left, his face was very different. He had an expression of pain...and of fear.

No wonder this is the Bible story I can still remember almost 40 years later. So, it's odd that in fifteen years of preaching nearly every Sunday, I never actually preached this passage as far as I can tell, until right now. This is a first for all of us!

Jesus' parable is playing on an important cultural norm of the day. In his day, the rich were expected to give alms to the poor, and to offer leftover food to the hungry as a way of demonstrating their virtue. As a part of this system, it was common outside the homes of rich families for there to be a bench on which the poor would sit and wait, expecting to receive alms. There is evidence of these benches outside of large homes preserved for posterity in Pompeii.

As the rich would host lavish parties and feasts, the poor would often be given food or coins from the host and guests. Were the alms self-serving, propping up a societal image and position for the wealthy, or was it based on a real sense of generosity for the poor? As it is today, that's probably dependent on the heart and mind of the one giving alms. Regardless of the motivations though, this was the system in which Jesus lived, and in which he has situated the characters in his parable.

The context only makes the rich man look even worse. Even if the motivation was simply maintaining his rich guy status with his rich guy friends, the rich man couldn't be bothered with even that. Everyday, the rich man would feast with his friends, and everyday, he ignored poor

Lazarus, covered with the visible signs of poverty, neglect, and disease, lying by a bench at the gate to the property, too weak to fend off the stray dogs.

What we read as “satisfied” in verse 21 is the same word Luke uses in chapter nine to describe the satisfaction of the crowd after Jesus’ miracle with the fish and bread, and it’s the same word used in his second beatitude describing how the hungry will be filled in 6:21. Luke’s use of the words only highlights that the rich man’s leftovers, scraps, and food that went in the trash would have been more than enough to more than satisfy Lazarus. The indictment against the rich man only gets worse the more we dig into this passage.

Death was inevitable for both men. The angels carry Lazarus off to reside with the patriarch, Abraham. I imagine something similar to Sam and Frodo being carried off by the eagles at the conclusion of the Lord of the Rings. The anonymous rich man lands in Hades, where he experiences perpetual torment. Making the torment even worse is that he can see the rest that Lazarus enjoys with Father Abraham. He is cut off from them, but he is also acutely aware of the discrepancies in how they both experience life after death.

Even from Hades, the rich man expects service from those he believes to be beneath him. He really hasn’t learned anything yet. No apology is offered, but he has the audacity to ask for Lazarus by name to come and meet his needs. It turns out that he did know Lazarus, and he had chosen to ignore him all those times he walked past him at the gate.

Judgment reversed the situated power of Lazarus and the rich man. History has forgotten the name of the rich man, but Lazarus’ name is still known two millennia after Jesus offered us this parable. As Richard Vinson wrote, “In real life, things mostly happen in the opposite way; the street people are faceless and those who starve daily nameless, but the wealthy have their faces all over the media and their names on buildings.

Hank Williams, yes the old country singer, might help us see Lazarus. In his song “Tramp on the Street,” Williams helps us recognize and identify with Lazarus a bit better:

Only a tramp was Lazarus sad fate  
He who lay down at the rich man's gate  
He begged for the crumbs from the rich man to eat  
He was only a tramp found dead on the street

He was some mother's darling  
He was some mother's son  
Once he was fair and once he was young  
And some mother rocked him, her darling to sleep  
But they left him to die like a tramp on the street

Jesus and Hank Williams both want us to see Lazarus. At Park View, as much as we can, we're trying to reverse this. The homeless, the unemployed, and those experiencing food insecurity are names, not numbers for us. They are neighbors, not clients. The issues that accompany poverty can't be hypotheticals at Park View. We eat with them, drink coffee with them, and learn their stories. When we get to know our neighbors, we hear life stories that are often filled with trauma, circumstances beyond their control, and the lack of opportunities that many of us often take for granted. It is easy to judge a person living in poverty. It may feel convenient to overlook that person, but Jesus elevates their name and their story, and invites us to remember them. This is one of the reasons that you coming to Park View is so important to us.

There's an undeniable question of stewardship in this passage. As another pastor wrote about this passage, "The parable serves to refocus the hearer on what we do with what we have, how our vocations serve our neighbors."

Imagine that Lazarus was lying by a bench along the sidewalk of a big church. What would change about a beggar's circumstances if he or she chose the bench outside of a gathering of Christians? Would the response be different than what we read here in Luke 16, or would it be the same? What would happen outside the home of a rich follower of Jesus?

Think about the brutal ending of this passage. Abraham claims the rich man's brothers that they have the law and the prophets to teach them. It won't do any good to send Lazarus. If the law and the prophets of Moses won't teach them the right way to treat another human being, even someone risen from the dead won't be able to get through to them.

Now remember who was telling this story. I'm not sure what we make of that. I'm still wrestling with that part of the passage to be honest with you. Let's step back from that for just a moment. Imagine that Lazarus was lying by a bench, along the sidewalk of a big church. Imagine there was a bench outside there on V.E.S. Road at the entrance to your parking lot. What would change about a beggar's circumstances? If he or she chose a bench outside the gathering of

Christians? A gathering of folks who claim to follow the life and example of Jesus? How would the response they received be different in what we read outside the rich man's house in Luke 16? What would happen if a poor beggar set up a bench outside the home of a follower of Jesus?

Jesus' words and example here invites us to see Lazarus, to know his name and his story. It challenges us at Park View and all of you who partner with us to see and know our neighbors. And out of our little or out of our abundance, to remember for us what may seem like scraps. What may be the things we absent mindedly toss aside. Might serve our neighbor. And what if we served our neighbor with not what we want to throw aside but to serve them with the very best? Jesus again and again in scripture invites everyone to the table. He sends people out into the hedges and the byways to invite others to the party. Maybe it's not just Lazarus receives some scraps from the party goes as we leave, but that we could all go out onto the bench and invite Lazarus in for the celebration. Amen and Amen!