"Poor Lazarus"

Rev. Bill Pinches

Luke 16:19-31

Mason, Michigan

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16th Sunday after Pentecost

There are two men named Lazarus in the Bible, and this is the story about the *other* one. The first, the more well-known, is the brother of Mary and Martha, who lived in the town of Bethany, near Jerusalem, who was a friend of Jesus, and whom Jesus raised from the dead. The *other* Lazarus is the one that appears in this story, one of the parables of Jesus, a story Jesus tells to teach a message.

Lazarus was a poor man. A poor man who had some kind of medical condition; his body was "covered with sores." He had, evidently, no family, no friends, nobody to take care of him. Nor does it seem that he had a job, something to do to earn money, so he could buy food. He probably couldn't get a job because of those sores; whatever skin disease he had made him an unpalatable sight, and it would have also rendered him "unclean" in the eyes of the religious leaders. Nobody wanted to be around him. Those sores stigmatized him; they made him an outcast, an untouchable, a pariah. He was probably homeless – a beggar on the streets. Nobody wanted him, nobody cared about him, nobody loved him.

What did he do to get by? He found a wealthy benefactor: "a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day." A wealthy benefactor, mind you, who wasn't doing *anything* to help Lazarus, other than perhaps disposing food trash in a place where Lazarus could scrounge for it. "Lazarus … longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table." I had an encounter with a man like Lazarus once. I was in San Francisco, some thirty years ago, at a conference, with some seminary classmates. We had just had dinner at a good restaurant. When we stepped outside, a thin, worn, haggard-looking man came up to us. He had just been rummaging around in the trash bins, looking for something to eat. Here we were, happy, jovial, full and satisfied after a nice meal, some of us carrying Styrofoam boxes containing our leftovers. This man came right up to us and asked us if we could spare any food. I have no idea what his name was – but he was Lazarus.

So there are two men. One, rich, well-fed, healthy, dressed in expensive clothes. The other, poor, hungry, covered with sores, living on the streets, dressed in rags, despised and rejected by all the people in town. Everybody knew the name of the rich man, of course; how could they not? But had anybody ever bothered to ask the poor man what *his* name was? Note this, and note this well: Jesus never gives us the name of the rich man. He just calls him "the rich man." But Lazarus – Lazarus the hungry, Lazarus the sick, Lazarus the unwanted – Jesus makes sure we know *his* name. He's a *person*. One of God's beloved children, *made in the very image of God*, even if nobody in town can see that. Pray that we can see that. Pray that, when we look at people who are hungry or homeless, we see them as *people* and not as *things*. As *living souls* inhabiting *living bodies*, granted with that same spark of God-given life that each of us have. All those people have *names*. How often do we bother to *learn* them?

There are three fundamental issues here in this parable. The first is *wealth disparity*. The vast difference between all that the rich man has, and what little the poor man has. Wealth disparity is the unequal distribution of assets among individuals or groups within a society. One man very rich; the other man very poor. That's the first issue. The second issue is *greed*. The rich man has accumulated a vast amount of wealth, and he doesn't hesitate to flaunt it. The only people who would be wearing "purple and fine linen" would be people who want to show the world just how rich they really are. He is the kind of person who wants *more* and *more*, without any regard for people less fortunate than he is. That's greed. Merriam-Webster defines it as "a selfish and excessive desire for more of something (such as money) than is needed." That's the second issue. The third is *generosity*, or, rather, the *lack* of it. This man isn't doing *anything* to help the poor or hungry people in his community. If Lazarus is finding scraps of food in the rich man's trash, it's not because the rich man was putting them there to be helpful. Those scraps were there because the rich man was being *wasteful*. He had far more than he needed – *and he wasn't sharing it*. There was a remarkable *lack* of generosity on the part of the rich man. Those are the three fundamental issues: wealth disparity, greed, and a lack of generosity.

Eventually, both men die. "The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham." He did not experience paradise in life. He suffered tremendously and he didn't receive love from anybody. Now, in death, all those situations are reversed: he's with the angels, his suffering is gone, he is loved and treasured and valued for who he is, a beloved child of God. The rich man, on the other hand, ends up in Hades, Jesus tells us, "where he was being tormented." His life of luxury, gluttony, and freedom from suffering has come to a very bitter end. The suffering he is experiencing in death is *greater* than the suffering that Lazarus was experiencing in life! All that wealth – what good does it do him now? All those riches – they can't help him *buy* his way out of this *hell* that he is in now.

So he begs for mercy. He can see up into the heavens, he can see poor Lazarus now living in glory, with Father Abraham, our spiritual ancestor, at his side. The rich man calls 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!" Isn't it interesting that the rich man knew Lazarus's *name*. He knew his name, and he *still* didn't do anything to help him. What a shame. What a *waste* of all that wealth and riches.

Father Abraham, up in Paradise, hears the rich man's plea emanating from the pit of Hades. He responds: "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." That's a simple statement of fact; Abraham is just reminding the rich man what is true. Abraham continues: "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." In other words: *you're stuck*. You've made your choice; you made that choice day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year, and now you have to face the *consequences* of that choice. It's time for *you* to experience what *suffering* really feels like.

The rich man cries out one more time: "Then I beg you, father, to send [Lazarus] to my father's house—for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment." That is, *even if you can't help <u>me</u>, please help <u>my brothers</u>, for they are making the same choices that I did.* Father Abraham replies: "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them." In other words: *they should already know what choices they should be making.* The phrase "Moses and the prophets" is just a shorthand way of referring to most of what we would call the Old

Testament – the Torah (the first five books of the Bible), the historical books stretching from Joshua through Kings, and all fifteen books about specific prophets. Father Abraham is saying, *your brothers have hundreds of pages telling them how God wants them to live and how God wants them to treat their neighbors, and your brothers have more than fifty opportunities a year to listen to a rabbi explain all of that in detail, and your brothers aren't listening.* They are making their choice, day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year, the same way this rich man had done. God has already given them *plenty* of opportunities to repent and experience mercy. But they keep making the sinful choice.

The rich man tries one last time: "No, father Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent." Abraham replies: "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." Some people are so hard-hearted, so selfish, so uncaring, that even a *resurrection* won't make any difference. Not even the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Here Jesus ends. And here *we* begin. We begin to ponder: *what does this mean for us?* The issues are clear. Wealth disparity. Greed. And a lack of generosity. What should we *do*?

There are a lot of studies that basically say the same thing: that over the course of the past 35-40 years, the wealthiest people in our country have gotten *dramatically* wealthier; that the gap between the very rich and the very poor has grown *exponentially*; and that the people who are feeling this change the most actually *aren't* the poorest people in our country. The people who are feeling it the most are *the middle class*, who, on the whole, have a lot less disposable income now than we did 35 or 40 years ago. There is also an incredibly dramatic wealth disparity in our country between white people and people of color, as a direct result of hundreds of years of racism, prejudice, and oppression. And across our world, there is an incredibly dramatic wealth disparity between the global north and the global south.

What does Jesus have to say about all this? In three very simple words: *it's not okay.* It's not okay for *some* people to be like the rich man in the parable – dressed in fine linen and feasting sumptuously every day – while there are *other* people who are like Lazarus – hungry, sick, and desperate. What *else* does Jesus have to say about all this? In one short sentence: *greed is a sin*, and *generosity is a virtue*. He says that over and over again, and in this parable he says it straight to our face. If we're hoarding wealth, if we're not giving to the needs of the poor, if we're feasting it up while other people are starving, we *have* to change our ways. If we're cutting aid to people who live in some of the poorest places in the world, we *have* to repent. For the sake of the poor people in the world? Yes. Absolutely. But not *just* for them. For *us* as well. For our *own* sake. For our *own* well-being. So that we don't find ourselves in the place where the rich man in the parable found himself: suffering, being tormented, in the pit of hell, with *no mercy* coming in our direction. We have opportunities *every single day* to become *less greedy*. We have opportunities *every single day* to become *more generous*. We have opportunities *every single day* to become one step closer to being the people Jesus wants us to be.

So what are we going to do? Should we feast sumptuously while other people starve? Should we dress ourselves in fine linen while other people go about in little more than rags? Should we keep letting injustice reign? Keep *sinning*? Or should we start taking Jesus's words *really seriously* – as seriously as he meant them when he said them? *What are we going to do?* Who are we going to be?

I think it's time for us to step up our game. I think it's time for us to *really* step up our game.

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