

Sermon for September 29, 2019
1 Tim. 6:6-19; Luke 16: 19-31

Holy Spirit, make me the messenger of Christ's words, not mine. Amen.

Too Late for Abraham

A clergy mentor once told me that pastors are called to do what Jesus did: to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Our gospel reading this morning certainly fits the bill for afflicting the comfortable, this pastor equally afflicted. This parable of the rich man and Lazarus is a particularly graphic story with an outcome we find uncomfortably harsh and perhaps even unfair because, of the two characters, surely we are akin to the rich man. But before exploring this passage, let's look back at verse 14 that precedes it. Jesus was a master at tailoring the thrust of his teachings to the specific audience he was addressing, and this story is no exception. Verse 14 clearly defines those who are listening to him as "the Pharisees, who were lovers of money" who sat "sneering at Jesus." *The challenge then for us is whether we can hear this story differently than the Pharisees did.*

Today's gospel unfolds like a play in three acts, and Jesus' images are vivid and bold. Let's start with Act I. There is no conversation, no interaction between the two main characters; it is set up more like a tableau or a framed print. We are introduced to the nameless rich man and the named poor man. We know the rich man is rich because he wears purple colored linen, and purple cloth, in Jesus' time, was reserved for high-ranking officials or members of the royal family. We know that the rich man feasts sumptuously while Lazarus goes hungry. We know that if feasting is going on, the rich man has company while Lazarus has no one but filthy dogs. We know that the rich man resides in a gated community to keep out the riff-raff, and we know that Lazarus is lying outside that gate, waiting for some act of kindness which never comes. The curtain is drawn on these two disparate types by that great equalizer among the human family, between rich and poor, death. End of Act I.

Let's stop there. Did you notice that Jesus omits any conversation or interaction between these two characters in the first scene? The economic, social, and class chasm that the rich man simply assumes to exist between him and a charity-case is as wide as the real chasm that exists between heaven and hell. We can imagine the rich man sweeping his purple linen robes aside as he passes Lazarus so as not to soil them with Lazarus' sores just as we can also imagine the way we avert our eyes when we pass a beggar. Or when we lock our car doors as we drive through a rundown neighborhood. Or when we shake our heads when we pass the ramshackle trailer parks where the migrant workers live. Or when we add to our savings accounts while tossing away the food bank envelope. Jesus said that the

poor would always be with us because he must have guessed that we wouldn't put a lot of effort into crossing the chasm to reach them.

In Act I, it is telling that, like the other rich man who built extra barns to store his wealth, this rich man, who appeared to have everything anyone could want, also dies unexpectedly. His wealth didn't protect or save him. In fact, it did just the opposite, even though we have no indication he was a sinner. It is telling that the name Lazarus means "God helps" while the rich man remains unnamed. These two lives appear to be entirely separate, divided by a table full of food and a gate. We don't have to look very far beyond this church property to notice similar scenes, if we are looking.

Let's turn to Act II. Both men have died, and it is when they arrive at their respective destinations that the radical nature of their transformation becomes real. Poor pitiful Lazarus is carried away into heaven by angels, but the rich man is simply "buried." Now, consider Jesus' audience again, filled with sneering Pharisees and others who were taught that being wealthy was a sign that God favored that person, while being poor was a sign that he or she had sinned. Jesus turns that teaching completely on its head. No wonder the Pharisees plotted against him. No wonder some left him.

How did Lazarus die? We are not told, but we can surmise. Perhaps by starvation while the rich man fed himself; or infection while the rich man bathed; or maybe he froze to death while the rich man slept in satin sheets. Lazarus' death underscores the urgency of Jesus' challenge to the well-off, to the Pharisees and also to us. Neglected by others, Lazarus now is prized in the sight of God for all eternity.

How did the rich man die? Again, we are not told. Maybe gluttony. Maybe a heart attack. Did the amount of food he ate, which he could have shared with Lazarus, kill him? Or the wine he drank? No doubt he was buried in the only thing he could take with him, his purple robes, and suddenly, these two lives that were so separated on earth seem intermingled in death. End of Act II.

Let's stop there. In this scene, the rich become poor and the poor become rich, in keeping with the Beatitudes which promise: *"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied."* Jesus clearly states that the reason that the rich man is in Hades and Lazarus is with Abraham is because the rich man lived well and Lazarus did not. There is no other explanation, no other fault or accusation brought against the rich man except his wealth--and that makes our purses and checkbooks feel heavy, and we may feel a bit afflicted in our comfort.

Maybe this parable is uncomfortable for those of us who have enough to eat, enough to drink, enough to wear in this life because we realize we haven't given much thought to those who don't have enough. Maybe it is uncomfortable for those of us who want to keep boundaries and walls in place, safeguarding friends who think and look and spend like us from those who don't but who need our assistance. Maybe this parable is challenging for those of us who always want to save for a rainy day while someone is sitting at our gate, hungry and lonely. Maybe it bothers us to realize that we often judge the poor by what they eat, wear, or drive, forgetting that what they are eating, wearing, or driving is all they can afford. Maybe it's a hard parable because, basically, we really do tend to look after Number One first.

But I think there is an implied message here, as well. It is not only the rich man's wealth that dooms him, but it is also his blindness, his lack of compassion for Lazarus, and his inability to even consider that he might share what he has with someone who has not. Someone once asked, "Which is the greater sin: apathy or hate?" In this parable, and often enough in our world, I would say apathy—the rich man's complete and utter lack of interest in someone in need. Apathy is an easy and comfortable lure, for us, and for our churches. Feeling afflicted yet? I am.

So let's move to Act III. Surely things will improve. Conversation finally ensues between the rich man and Abraham, and it is in this conversation that we realize it is too late for the rich man to be calling on Abraham. He did not understand compassion in his earthly life and he doesn't understand it now.

We know this because the first thing the rich man does is ask Abraham to send Lazarus down with some water, because throats get pretty dry in Hades. He finally notices Lazarus, but only so Lazarus can serve him. He still sees Lazarus as "other" and less than. Lazarus—who did not ask for anything while he was alive—now says nothing. It is Abraham who speaks for him, and Abraham who points out that the chasm that once might have been crossed between them is now too vast.

Secondly, the rich man calls Abraham "Father Abraham," indicating that he sees himself as part of the family of God. In Jewish tradition, the bosom of Abraham was regarded as the place of highest bliss, and no doubt the rich man cannot understand why Lazarus is there instead of himself. Lazarus is now the honored guest at the heavenly banquet while the rich man is in torment. How the dinner tables have turned. But Abraham will not appease this man because he is, of course, not "family." If he were, he would have done what the prophets commanded: Provide for the orphaned and widowed. Share with the exiled and alien. Practice hospitality to strangers.

Next, the rich man asks Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers to shape up. While he finally thinks of someone other than himself, the rich man still regards Lazarus as a servant and as his errand boy: "Send Lazarus to do it." Again, Abraham says no, that if the brothers won't listen to Moses and the prophets, they won't even listen to someone raised from the dead—a distinct and frightening foreshadowing of Christ's death and resurrection and message to us.

And finally, there is no repentance on the part of the rich man, no acknowledgement of his self-centeredness. He is simply bewildered. The play ends with the rich man in the torments of hell and Lazarus in the arms of Abraham. Curtain down.

Let's look at Act III. Before we throw up our hands in the face of this apparent all-or-nothing morality, we need once again to recall Jesus' audience. The Pharisees, "who loved money," would surely have been as shocked by this outcome as are we. But what better way to open the Pharisees' eyes to the scandal of economic inequality than to suggest that it will be reversed for each person for all eternity? Jesus is trying to address the existence of the appalling wealth and absolute poverty that exist on earth, then and now.

Jesus' message wasn't particularly novel. Moses warned: "Do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor" (Deuteronomy 15:7). And the prophets? "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice?" says God through Isaiah. "Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house?" (Isaiah 58:6-7).

If we are tired of being afflicted, there is good news for us this morning. While it may have been too late for the rich man, it is not too late for us. We are invited to hear and to heed the words of the one who did indeed "rise from the dead": "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me. Just as you did it to the least of my brothers and sisters, you did it to me" (Matthew 25:35-40). As the camp song goes, we are to "take a look, open our eyes" to the needs around us, and then to act upon those needs, as we can, both as individuals and as church. Putting our actions in line with our beliefs -- living a life of integrity -- is what makes us different from the Pharisees.

Thanks be to God.

