The parable that we hear from Jesus this morning is one of those wonderful examples of the way that the characters are almost caricatures of themselves. As Shannon said last week, if Jesus is telling a parable to his followers, you can pretty well assume that he’s saying it somewhat tongue-in-cheek. So in the first part of the parable, Jesus sets the stage for us by describing the state of affairs of the rich man, often called Dives (which is the Latin word meaning “rich” or “opulently wealthy”), and Lazarus (whose name means “God is my help”), who are set as polar opposites on the socio-economic spectrum.

In the parable, Dives has the most expensive, designer clothes, and his normal daily meal is the equivalent of an exorbitant, lavish feast. It was common in Jesus’ day that, when a very wealthy person had a feast, instead of using a cloth napkin, the guests would wipe their hands off on pieces of bread, and then throw the bread onto the floor for the dogs to eat.

Lazarus, on the other hand, is so poor that he hopes only to eat the scraps of bread on the floor that had been used as hand wipes. Instead of being clothed in finery, Lazarus is clothed in disgusting, festering sores. And to add insult to injury in this case, even the dogs harass him by licking his painful sores.

When we hear about the disparity between these two characters, it seems a little over the top, with the rich person feasting every day, and sad Lazarus sitting at the gate looking as pathetic as he can be. It almost brings to mind that often parodied scene in *Oliver Twist*, Charles Dickens’ own social satire, where a hungry and undernourished Oliver goes up and says, “Please, Sir, I want some more,” and the over-fed, rotund Mr. Bumble yells out in disbelief, “More? More?! Never before has a boy wanted more!”

Here, in Jesus’ parable, Lazarus is our pathetic Oliver Twist, so low compared to the rich man Dives that you can almost hear the listeners chuckle at the absurdity in difference between the two men. But like many of Jesus’ parables, it’s a chuckle at a ridiculous joke that’s followed by a deep sense of unease, as the truth of such a reality bubbles up in the minds of the listener, and what once appeared ridiculous now seems too close for comfort.

So now that Jesus has set the stage for us with these grossly different characters of the rich man and Lazarus, we find out that they both die. There’s no mention of how it happened, whether Lazarus died from his infected sores or malnourishment, or if Dives died from one too many “wafer-thin mints” à la Monty Python’s Mr. Creosote, but the reason doesn’t really matter. Just like it doesn’t matter how the priest, the rabbi, and the Presbyterian minister all ended up in that same bar for any number of religious jokes, the point is simply that they died and ended up in equally opposite--although reversed--situations in death, as they had in life.
And in death, we see that Dives has reaped what he has sown, using up all the comforts of the earthly world without thought to another person who was literally on his doorstep, while Lazarus, who was tormented in his earthly life, finds comfort in the arms of Father Abraham in his death. Despite his very best attempts to gain access to respite from his torment, asking favors of the very person whom he neglected, the rich man Dives is turned away.

In a last ditch effort to redeem his situation, the rich man begs Abraham to let Lazarus go from the land of the dead back to his five brothers in the land of the living, to warn them of their potential fate so that they might repent, but Abraham tells him in no uncertain terms, “They’ve had all the help they need from Moses and the prophets, and if they won’t listen to them, then a man raised from the dead isn’t going to change their minds.” No Jacob Marley in chains for those Scrooge-y brothers, says Father Abraham.

And so Jesus ends the parable of The Rich Man and Lazarus. But as is the case with so many of Jesus’ parables, the story isn’t really about Dives or Lazarus. A better title might have been “The Brothers of Dives,” because at the end of the day, we aren’t meant to identify with the rich man or Lazarus in this story. As Alan Culpepper observes in his commentary on the Gospel of Luke, “...the parable is far more subtle. By the end of the parable we realize that we stand in the place of the brothers, and the question is whether we will hear the Scriptures and repent.”

So the pressing question that we are forced to ask then, as we reflect on Dives’ eternal sentence—and, by extension, the listener’s sentence if repentance is not achieved—is this: what did he do wrong? What was the specific sin that has caused him to be separated from Lazarus and Father Abraham in such a merciless way? What do we have to do to avoid the torment that the rich man is experiencing?

New Testament scholar William Barclay says:

“What was the sin of Dives? He had not ordered Lazarus to be removed from his gate. He had made no objections to his receiving the bread that was flung away from his table. He did not kick him in the passing. He was not deliberately cruel to him. The sin of Dives was that he never noticed Lazarus, that he accepted him as part of the landscape and simply thought it perfectly natural and inevitable that Lazarus should lie in pain and hunger while he wallowed in luxury...

The sin of Dives was that he could look on the world’s suffering and need and feel no answering sword of grief and pity pierce his heart; he looked at a fellow-man, hungry and in pain, and did nothing about it. His was the punishment of the man who never noticed.”

When I was little, one of the most maddening things that my mother used to tell me was “Lydia! Be aware of your surroundings!” Granted, I was an incredibly clumsy child, always running into things or knocking something over, but at the end of the day, it was advice that the rich man could have used and taken to heart. In fact, if he’d had my mother around to remind him, perhaps Dives could have avoided eternal torment! But the point is simply that the sin of Dives is that he

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became so wrapped up in his own life, in his own needs, and in his own consumption, that he failed to see the man on his doorstep who also had needs to be addressed.

And so that brings it back to us. We live in a culture of great excess, and yet a culture which values self-sufficiency above all other virtues. It’s a culture that thinks it’s okay to cut over 40 billion dollars to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, while simultaneously giving billions of dollars in tax breaks and subsidies to already-wealthy individuals and corporations. We live in a culture where it’s acceptable to cut funding to our schools as long as we can blame the affected teachers and students for the systemic barriers that breed a failure to educate and be educated. We live in a culture, both socially and religiously, that is more comfortable giving moral imperatives about the ethics of the bedroom than about the ethics of the bank account, and who can piously make distinctions between the “deserving” and the “undeserving poor” based on a hasty glance into a grocery cart. Stephen Colbert summed it up pretty succinctly in a segment about who is deserving of a Christian’s help saying: “If this is going to be a Christian nation that doesn't help the poor, either we have to pretend that Jesus was just as selfish as we are, or we've got to acknowledge that He commanded us to love the poor and serve the needy without condition and then admit that we just don't want to do it.”

If we’re the brothers in the story, the paradoxical Schrodinger’s Cat of moral possibility, simultaneously capable of and participating in both decency and degeneration, what are we supposed to do, especially in a society so filled with contradictions and inequalities? What choice do we make when the metaphorical Lazarus shows up at our gate? And in truth, with so many problems lurking just outside our door, which Lazarus do we choose?

The reality is that we’re not completely reprobate, and I’m guessing that, if Dives were a real person, neither was he. But we are inundated daily with so many injustices that they either fade into the background of our consciousnesses for another day, or we become too paralyzed to know where to start. And as a congregation, we’ve come to a place where it’s time for us to look at the community around us, and to decide, as Frederick Buechner said, “where our deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

We’ve been celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights Movement at the church all year, and we’ve taken time to acknowledge those among us who had courage to enact the ordinary deeds of extraordinary kindness in the opening of a door and in the sharing of a hymnal. We made restitution for injury against a man and his family in song and speech. We prayed and worshiped together in the memories of how the Spirit’s breath flew alongside us to shape who we have been, who we hope to be, and as we still ourselves to sense where the “ruah” moves us next. This is a holy time.

I have been honored to walk alongside you as you have led me by the sincerity and integrity of your self-examination over the past few months, however painful or challenging or elusive it may have been at times. In the process, your story shows you to be some of the finest people I’ve had the privilege to meet, not because you have exhibited some kind of heroic moral ideal, but because you know yourselves as you are in both the failings and in the fulfillments of what it

4 http://paw.princeton.edu/issues/2012/11/14/pages/6568/
means to live into the Gospel message, welcoming the unwelcome and making a place for those who literally sat your doorstep in need of warmth and shelter.

And, for me, this time of reflection on the change that came to this church and this city in the blood and tears of men and women and in the deaths of four little girls, the sitting at table with award-winning writers and justice-seeking speakers and people who have come to simply remember and wonder “what now?”, makes me think about my father-in-law, the late Ron Casey, who was the editorial page editor for the Birmingham News. I never met him, but he’s as real to me in stories and anecdotes as he is a tall-tale: a Pecos Bill of the Birmingham News, who lassoed stories of corruption and inequality while being tied up at gunpoint in the woods by the thugs of an unscrupulous sheriff, and who spoke truth about injustices in this city and state that he loved dearly enough to try to change, but who also danced in the kitchen with his wife and made terrible puns and rode bikes to the local Shell station with his son to grab a Coke and some Combos on cool summer mornings. I think of him because I wonder what he would say we should do next, and with so many areas of need in our city, I don’t doubt he’d have an opinion.

They tell me Ron used to say, “If you want fine wine, go to France. If you want to write editorials, go to Alabama, because there’s always something about which to be outraged.” So, where does our compassion move us to take notice of a poor, sick man sitting on our doorstep? What righteous anger will move us to turn over the moneychangers’ tables here in Birmingham? Where do we hear God whispering or shouting or nudging at us to act? Where do we go from here?

Our 50th Anniversary Task Force is calling us to be a part of that conversation, and at this time, I’d like you to find the index card in your bulletin, and enter into the discussion about where we go next. It doesn’t have to be long--a sentence or two, or even a few words will do--but I invite you to take the next minute or so to write down the need or issue that you’re passionate about, or that you observe in our community that you’d love to see addressed. And when you’re finished, hold on to those cards, and put them into the plate during the Offering, and we’ll compile them for next week’s Mission Future conversations at First at First.

The parable of The Rich Man and Lazarus is an open-ended question for us listeners to choose a different path than Dives. It’s a call for us to move outside ourselves to see the needs in the world that affect our brothers and sisters, and to do something about it. May the Holy Spirit guide us to find that next place where our gifts and passion and God’s purpose truly meet in and around this community of faith. Amen.