



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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THE NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

What Will It Take? Luke 16:19-31; I Timothy 6:6-19

The thing I like about Jesus' parables is the way in which they pull me into the story. I feel good knowing that when I wander away like a lost sheep, God will come looking for me. When I get myself temporarily misplaced by the choices I make and the things I do, God will hunt me up and put me back in my right place. I am grateful that even when I walk away from God, toting every grace I have ever received, and completely mess up my life, God will welcome me home if I choose to return. Jesus' parables pull us into the story.

The thing I sometimes dislike about Jesus' parables is the way they pull me into the story. They point out that I am often one of the people who passes by on the other side when I see someone in need. They remind me that sometimes I am like the seed that falls among the thorns. God's truth flourishes within me for a while but the cares, concerns, and pleasures of life choke the growth of the Spirit within me. The parables highlight my tendency to play the part of the Pharisee in the temple, pretending to lift my eyes to heaven when I am really focused on the sinner beside me, grateful to God that I am not as bad as he is. Jesus' parables pull us into the story.

The old trademark often stamped on a parable is that it is "an earthly story with a heavenly meaning," but parables are much more than clever stories that teach us something about God or ourselves. They had the punch to speak to matters of great concern two thousand years ago and continue to carry the power to zero in on what matters greatly to us today. If we let them, parables can open our eyes, our minds, and our hearts to the fullness of life that is possible in God's community.

Nevertheless, when I began reflecting on the parable of the rich man and Lazarus last week, I did so looking for the "heavenly meaning" in a very earthy story. This Lazarus is not the same man who was raised from the dead, the brother of Martha and Mary. "Lazarus" was a common name in those days, a nickname, if you will, of the Hebrew name "Elazar." It was like calling a fellow named Robert either Robbie or Bobby. By the way, quite appropriate to the story, the name Lazarus means "God has helped."

It is easy to miss some things in this story. It tells us of a wealthy man dining in his palatial home, completely unaware of a beggar who is lying at his gate, covered in sores, and pleading for food. It sounds a lot like a hospitality parable, concerned with the ancient kindness of showing welcome and generosity to any stranger who appears at one's door.

I suspect that everyone who heard Jesus tell this story was very familiar with beggars and the places they staked out for themselves. Even today we can find people begging at key intersections like the off ramp from Highway 64 East beside IHOP and Lowe's or the exit from the Walmart shopping center. Those are high traffic locations and usually good for business. Not a person in the crowd had escaped being asked for a piece of bread or a coin for a better tomorrow.

Suddenly the scene shifts. Both men have died and experienced a reversal in roles. Lazarus is now feasting in the "bosom of Abraham" and the formerly rich man is begging in Hell. On earth, the man could not spare a crumb from his table, crumbs which his dogs gulped down before they trotted outside to lick the wounds of the agonizing Lazarus. Now he is begging for Lazarus to be merciful to him. He asks Abraham to send Lazarus with a bit of cool water to give him relief, but Abraham refuses the request, stating that the gulf between the two is too wide to be bridged. The man asks that at the very least he send Lazarus to warn his brothers and father of what will happen if they continue to live as he did. Abraham reminds the man that God has already sent the prophets to teach his people about the choices they make and their consequences. But, the man counters, they will pay attention if someone returns from the dead to warn them. "No," says the father of our faith, "they won't be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." And we cannot help but think of all the things Jesus taught, often in parables, that we have ignored since his resurrection.

The "heavenly message" of this parable, which we can discover quite easily, is that if we hope to spend eternity in heaven, we had better be nice to other people, especially poor people. While we know that our salvation is based, not on works, but on grace, we also know that how we treat one another is an indicator of our faith. I originally thought that I would talk to you today about the need for us to get rid of all the excuses we have for not living better lives. God has laid out for us what is expected for the life of faith and, if we want to reap the benefits of God's goodness, we had better follow his plan.

As the week progressed, however, I realized that as long as we read this parable as a story about the fate of the rich man, we are actually thinking only of ourselves and will simply spiritualize the parable and miss the core of its message. There is nothing at all wrong with getting our own house in order. We are called to follow Jesus and that does mean repenting and getting our lives straightened out. This parable, however, reminds us that if we follow Jesus, we will do what the rich man failed to do: he never noticed Lazarus.

He never noticed Lazarus. Certainly he had seen him. Every morning when he went out to get his paper, he saw him limping down the street to claim his spot for the day. He knew that once his dogs had eaten their fill, they trotted off in the direction of the pathetic man, but he hoped they would chase him away. He never paid attention to Lazarus. He never spoke to him, asked about him, or really cared about why this man was in the condition he was in. He did not care about Lazarus. This morning I realize that there could not be a better parable to speak to our lives today than this one. Lazarus is lying at our gate, begging for help, and most of us, including myself, are too concerned with our own lives to notice him. We don't hear him or look at him or otherwise pay attention to him.

If Jesus were telling this story today, Lazarus might well go by the name of Keith or Terence, Tyre or Philando or Alton. You might recognize those names as belonging to men who have recently been killed in police confrontations. Today this parable would be about Black men who are being killed across our country in unconscionable numbers. Most of us switched between channels on Tuesday and Wednesday evenings as the protests in Charlotte over the shooting by police of Keith Scott went from peaceful to destructive. Tragically, in the midst of the chaos, one Black protester was shot and killed by another one. Meanwhile, in Tulsa, Oklahoma, peaceful protests condemned the shooting of Terence Crutcher who was unarmed. In a database maintained by *The Washington Post*, 173 Black men are identified as having been killed by police this year. Altogether, over 700 people have died from police gunfire this year.¹

In no way is the sole responsibility for such sad statistics to be laid at the feet of law enforcement. We live in an environment of fear. Violence seems to lurk around every corner and our police officers work in constant

¹"Fatal Force," *The Washington Post*; available online at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/national/police-shootings-2016/>.

danger. Another tragic fact, reported by *USA Today* in July, is that twenty-six police officers have been killed in the line of duty this year.²

Sadly, it has become commonplace to hear that a Black man has been killed during some kind of altercation with police or to hear that an officer has been killed in an angry confrontation. Added to that news is the sad reality that hundreds, perhaps thousands, more young Black men are killed every year by violent means. The protests that took place in Charlotte and Tulsa and many other cities are cries for help. Lazarus is indeed at the door, begging for help, for a crumb of recognition, for a healing balm from the disease of violence and death.

Granted this situation is a complicated one. It is no more right to label all police as racist and prejudiced as it is to label all Black men as armed and dangerous. What can we do? What must we do?

First and foremost, Jesus calls us to pay attention. We cannot become numb to what has happened in other communities simply because it has not happened here. We are fortunate that we have a police department that does a good job of handling dangerous situations without deadly force. We are fortunate that so far we have not had a violent confrontation that resulted in someone dying needlessly. But we cannot ignore what is happening in other communities and what could easily happen in Rocky Mount this afternoon. Too many people are dying by violence of all kinds. Lazarus is at the door and begging for help. We must pay attention.

There is no denying that racism and prejudice are potent factors in the violence that we see happening around us. Those attitudes are prevalent on all sides, but we cannot pretend that they are not there or that they are not ours. I don't think the rich man in Jesus' parable had any ill will toward Lazarus. I imagine he was a friendly, kind, respected member of the community. He was likely active in his synagogue and gave generously to the temple benevolence fund for the express purpose of helping people like Lazarus get the help they need. He may have felt powerless to do anything that would be of real help to this poor man. He needed not only food but medical care and a place to live. He needed a support system and resources the man could not begin to provide by himself. Lazarus needed a lot of help, but the rich man did not notice Lazarus. We have to pay attention to what is happening around us and to what is going on inside of us.

²Gregg Zoroya, "26 Police Killed So Far in 2016, up 44% from 2015," *USA TODAY*, (July 9, 2016); available online at: <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2016/07/08/nationwide-police-shooting-deaths/86861082/>.

We have to examine our attitudes as individuals and as a society. Do we truly regard every other person as a child of God? If so, what must we do to live out that relationship? We cannot continue to believe that another person has less value to God than we do. We cannot continue to treat other people as inferior or unwelcome in this world that God has given as a gift to us all.

What changes need to be made to uphold the dignity and rights of all people? What opportunities must be made available so that all people have the advantages we enjoy? What kind of community do we want for all people and not just for ourselves?

Certainly, our law enforcement officers need training and support to overcome fears and perceptions that can affect their reactions while doing their jobs. They also need our support and encouragement while risking their lives to protect our lives. We need to support, thank, and pray for our law enforcement.

We need to bring about change in our communities. Poverty and lack of opportunity are dangerous factors throughout our country and world which result in frustration, anger, and sometimes violence which will never be an acceptable response. What can we do to give everyone the opportunity for a better, safer life? What can we do to take care of Lazarus before he dies?

This parable is not so much about getting our lives in order so that we may one day enjoy the benefits of heaven whatever they might be. I think it is about getting our lives in order so that all people enjoy the benefits of this life which God has given to us here and now. I think it is about paying attention and caring enough about one another to do something to bring healing and hope to an often frightened and frightening world. It is about sharing life together now so that we will also share God's goodness in the life that is to come. Long before anyone coined the phrase, God in Christ announced to the world that all lives do matter.

I like Jesus' parables because they pull me into the story and make me a part of God's work in our world. I also dislike his parables because they pull me into the story and remind me that I am a part of God's work in the world. Lazarus is at our gate. He is our brother. He is our sister. He is us! We know this because Jesus told us—before and after his resurrection. What will it take for us to listen and notice?

We gather here week by week, O Lord of our hearts, because in the midst of the challenges and tensions and uncertainties of life, we know that in this sacred place and among these our brothers and sisters is where we should be. We gather to experience your presence through the nurturing of your Holy Spirit, to hear an inspiring word or melody that might cause our hearts to soar above the mundane concerns of the day, and to receive an encouraging word or embrace that will reassure us that we are cared for and accepted. We gather because in this world of conflict and confusion, we need to be reminded of the peace which only you can bring and to hear again the good news that your truth will set us free.

Even while we come with gratitude for the abundance of these gifts and all the loving-kindness you offer to us, O Lord, we confess that we also come with reservations. We are called to be your disciples, but yours can be a costly discipleship, sometimes requiring of us more than we bargained for. Your never-ending streams of mercy call forth our hymns of praise, and your light shines to guide us through this journey of life, yet we often feel inadequate to live out the demands of the gospel. You call us to extend welcome and a cup of cold water to others in your name, yet our suspicion of the other causes us to hesitate to be hospitable and our insecurities convince us that our resources are inadequate to meet the needs around us. We hear the difficult truths of your word and are confronted by the teachings of Jesus which challenge our assumptions and nudge us from our comfortable places. We sense the stirring of your Spirit who will not leave well enough alone, who nestles deep within our souls and seeks to transform us in ways that are both inviting and unsettling. And so we begin to wonder whether we have the strength or the courage to claim the name of Christ and to live as your disciples at all.

Create us anew, Loving God, that we might recognize and live the fullness of your image within us. Cleanse and redeem us, Merciful Christ, that we might become suitable vessels, fragile though we are, to carry your gospel to the world you came to love and serve. Fill and empower us, Renewing Spirit, that we might be equipped to respond to the needs around us out of the abundance we have been given. Grant us the strength to do the work of discerning your will. Grant us the wisdom to distinguish your vision from rewards and praise that are fleeting. And grant us the courage to reach out beyond ourselves to extend mercy wherever we find suffering, always remembering that in your kingdom, we must lose ourselves in order to find our true life in you.

We give witness to our faith that we do not travel this journey alone, as we pray in the name of the Risen Christ who came to dwell among us and by the power of the Holy Spirit who abides with us still. Amen.