

16 Pentecost                      Luke 16:19-31  
Christ and Grace                September 29, 2019  
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I need to let you know that in the Revised Common Lectionary, for this year – which is Year C, all the really great stewardship texts are read in September. So, I've been preaching the stewardship sermons all through this month - and you didn't even get a warning so you could stay home and miss them!

In the time leading up to today's parable, Jesus has been in some serious dialogue with the Pharisees. In Luke's Gospel, it's clear to Jesus that the Pharisees are seeking to justify themselves, seeing prosperity as God's reward for good conduct and poverty as deserved punishment for sin. Jesus does not let the Pharisees or us off easy on this subject of wealth, and what we do with the gifts God has given to us.

This is a story about a rich man and what happens when he pays no attention to the poor man at his gate. And what an amazing story it is - full of powerful imagery and contrast. In it we see wealth and poverty, heaven and hell, compassion and indifference. It's a parable of judgment that can make us squirm in our seats – that makes us wonder where we are in God's eyes. Of course, we all want to identify with Lazarus, to believe that we have suffered plenty and will be with God as our reward. But then comes the niggling doubt... there is something uncomfortably familiar about the rich man's behavior. The parable is working exactly as Jesus intends!

Jesus describes the rich man as dressed in purple and fine linen. We also hear that he feasted sumptuously every day. All of this, and the fact that his house was gated, indicates that this man lacked for nothing. In contrast, Lazarus was a poor man. Unable to provide for himself, knew where chances might be good, and he lay at the gate of the rich man waiting in hope for the crumbs from the rich man's table. Lazarus was helpless and hopeless, unclean by Judaic standards, dependent on others to provide for his needs.

Almost anywhere we go, we can find people on street corners, begging for handouts. Today's Lazarus also knows where the best gates are – the affluent intersections with long cycles before the traffic lights change. Just last week, as I left the store with my car full of groceries, there was an elderly man on the median at the stoplight, holding a sign that said he was homeless. He looked homeless. I gave him \$5 and he blessed me! That's how Jesus turns things upside down.

What is our response to these modern day Lazaruses? Because if we are honest, our response could be the source of our discomfort. Are we to give indiscriminately to every beggar on the street when, let's be honest, we assume he or she will just buy more drugs or alcohol? How do we know who is truly in need and who is scamming us? And are we called to be the judges or do we leave that to God? What if the rich man in the Gospel assumed that Lazarus was a good for nothing panhandler, too lazy to work for a living? Nope, sorry, but Jesus has made it clear in this parable that it was the rich man who was in the wrong, turning the assumptions of his listeners upside down.

Before going to seminary, I worked with the county mental health agency, interacting on a daily basis with those who were truly poor in mind, body and spirit. Their life stories were the modern day equivalent of the sores borne by Lazarus. When I began my work there, I was very cautious. It was easier to avoid eye contact, to limit my conversation, to not get involved. After all, what could I really do to help them beyond the basics of my job description? But I was kidding myself.

The truth is, I was afraid of these indigent souls who were often suffering from addictions of every kind, and I was judging them. There was a chasm between us. I was afraid of the unknown, afraid of people who were not like me. I made judgments about how they came to be in the place they were in, relying on handouts to survive. But over time, an amazing thing happened as I really began to see them and listen to their stories. As I began to intentionally engage with each person, God's presence with us became tangible. As we began to trust one another, relationships were formed and out of those relationships healing began to take place.

Could it be that this parable is less about money, and more about sharing whatever gifts God has given to us? The gifts may be money, though I suspect Jesus wants us to share our very selves – to be in relationship with people, especially those on the margins. I suspect Jesus is asking us to form relationships, not only by financial assistance, but also by sharing gifts of love, kindness, encouragement, or simply time spent with someone who is lonely. Who sits just outside our gate, going unnoticed because we are too busy, too complacent, too judgmental, or too afraid of to really see them? How many chasms of indifference and good intentions have been made?

Perhaps there is a chasm right outside our gate – right outside this church door. It could be a chasm of complacency or guardedness between Walnut Hill and downtown Petersburg, a chasm of fear between white and other skin colors, a chasm of judgment between wealth and poverty, between Democrats and Republicans, between corporate executives and the homeless. As long as there are chasms there will be poverty, inequality, protest, violence, and suffering.

Perhaps this is why Jesus, our Shepherd, crosses over the great chasm again and again and again, offering us a way forward. A way of selflessness. A way of sacrifice. A way of losing our lives in order to gain them. This is the core meaning of stewardship – the generous offering to others out of all that God has given to us.

As we walk in love as Christ loved us, we are called as the Christ and Grace community of faith to see those who are suffering outside of our gate. The beloved of God who live in poverty of mind, body or spirit all share a common suffering. Their hell is in the present tense. For hell is a *lack* of community, where there is no shared compassion or love.

All that we do at Christ and Grace is only possible through the generosity of each of us. All that we give of our time, talent, and treasure is what breaks down the gates and crosses the chasms so that the Good News of Jesus Christ can be made known.

Amen.