

Luke 16:19-31

¹⁹“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. ²²The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴He called 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.’ ²⁵But Abraham said, ‘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. ²⁶Besides all this, 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.’ ²⁷He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house— ²⁸for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ ²⁹Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ ³⁰He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ ³¹He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”



So the story is this. A poor homeless guy sits by the side of the road, by the entrance to the gated community where a bunch of rich people live. The gate is there to keep all the homeless beggars out, to keep them from bothering the rich people and asking for food or money or help of any kind.

The way Jesus tells the story, we don't know the rich man's name. It could be any rich man, any rich person. All rich people might not look alike, but there is a particular type of rich person---the generic brand of rich person---self-indulgent, pampered, never wanting for a single thing.

Never noticing or interacting with the poor people who sit outside the gate, in need, hungry, sick and hurting.

The rich man has no relationship with the homeless guy. In fact, it's surprising that he actually knows Lazarus' name! And yet somehow he does. Maybe the rich man used to know Lazarus and then married into money.

Or they used to live next door to each other when they were kids and the rich man struck it big in the stock market or inherited his wealth from his great-aunt Emily or maybe he was a thief or a drug smuggler or who knows how he got rich! Maybe he got it by working hard and being smart.

However he got his money, he wasn't any too generous with it! Day after day he sailed past Lazarus sitting at his gate without giving him a glance. He could have afforded to toss Lazarus a dollar or two now and then, or sent out the left-overs from one of his parties, but no, that would just encourage Lazarus to keep sitting there with his hand out. So better just to ignore him.

If you start giving him hand-outs, he will have no motivation to ever go get a job and pretty soon there will be a whole bunch more beggars at the gate!

So just like we never make eye contact with the homeless people who stand at intersections with signs hoping for help, the rich man never even looked at Lazarus, and he certainly didn't stop to talk and develop any kind of relationship with Lazarus!

So how did he know his name? We don't know, but maybe one of the servants found it out and told him.

Anyway, both of these men died. For Lazarus it was undoubtedly a relief, something he had been praying for. For the rich man I'm guessing it might have been a surprise! Maybe too many rich dinners and not enough exercise bending over to help others! But not even all the money in the world can keep death away!

All the years of his life the rich man had plenty to eat, plenty of people around him, people to serve him and answer every time he asked for something. Now, dead and buried, he has no one to help him. It's too late. He's on his own, in the fire of Hades.

Jesus doesn't make it sound like this is God's punishment. He makes it sound like this is a natural consequence of the choices he made in life----he chose not to build real relationships of love and trust and respect---certainly not with Lazarus! He chose not to be compassionate or caring. He chose to spend his money, energy, and time only on himself.

He was a selfish, self-centered kind of man. And if he never gave a thought to the needs of the poor man outside of his gate, he certainly never thought about the commandments of God to care for the poor and needy, or even about the power and sovereignty of God. What did he need God for? He was doing quite well on his own!

He made a choice to put himself first, and it was that choice that sent him to Hades. He never gave a thought to God in life, and even in death his thoughts were not of God but only of having Lazarus serve him by bringing him some water.

Finally, when Abraham told him there was no way for Lazarus to come to him, he thinks of someone else---his brothers. He wants somehow to warn them that the same thing will happen to them if they don't change how they live.

And Abraham tells him that won't work.

They already have the words of the prophets and Moses and they haven't listened. He says, "Even if someone rises from the dead, they will not listen!"

In the context of the parable, Abraham is referring to Lazarus coming back from the dead as the rich man is asking Abraham. But of course the reference is also to Jesus Christ himself. Jesus is saying that there will be people who won't even believe the Good News when he is resurrected.

And by that choice, by that decision to never admit that they need God, they will end up in a hell of their own making, in a place where no one can help them because they have never admitted that they needed God's help!

When the rich man chose to ignore Lazarus, when he passed on by without helping or speaking or even looking at Lazarus, he was ignoring God's commands to help the needy. When his turn came to need help, his begging was unanswered because he had not heard the begging of the needy outside his gate.

When he wanted someone else to help his brothers he was told that they had all the help they needed, contained in the books of the Law and the Prophets. Even the Good News of the resurrection of Christ would not be enough for them to really hear

She had an excuse why she couldn't do that and asked me again to bring her something to eat. I explained again. She started to badger me and get irritated, asking why couldn't I wire her some money. I again pointed her to places where she could get help. And I said good-bye.

Now, don't get me wrong. Ordinarily, I would like to help her. It's not the money. I have given people food and even a few dollars in the past.

I have sat on the front steps of the church with homeless people and had long conversations about their struggles and their needs. I have bought them food, sometimes at fast food places, and a few have even sat down and talked with me while we ate together.

But something about this woman made me not want to help her. I have had to stop and think about what it was.

And this is what I figured out. It was a sense of relationship. She was not humbly asking for help. She didn't listen to what I was saying. She came across as having a certain sense of entitlement, that because I'm a pastor I should help her, that she would not stop until I did.

My own concerns and even the way I was trying to help were not good enough for her.

The ways that God tries to help us are several. The first is this---the Bible! Just as Abraham told the rich man that his brothers have Moses and the prophets, we also have those words to listen to.

The story of the Old Testament is about the relationship between God and the people of Israel through many generations. It was often a rocky relationship because the people had a hard time really listening to God. They could not always admit that they needed help, and sometimes help was offered in a way they didn't want to hear.

So they badgered and got irritated with God and sometimes God let them be, let them try to make it on their own. Because you can only talk to someone so long before you figure out that you're never going to get through to them. You might as well save your breath.

Eventually, though, God gave in and sent someone to convince them, to engage them in a relationship, to be visible and present in the flesh. And that convinced enough people that God was serious about being in a relationship with them, convinced enough people that God cares, that God LOVES us--- that even today people are still convinced even without that physical, bodily presence of God- with –us!

God finally did send someone to cross that great chasm and then resurrected him from the dead, and at least some people came to understand that God was serious about helping us, about feeding us with living bread and cooling us with living water!

The Good News that God so loved the world has been around since the beginning of creation. God is always trying to convince people that what he wants from us is a deep, lasting relationship---a loving relationship between Creator and created, between the holy and the sinner, between the all-powerful and the weak.

A relationship between the One who has everything to give and the ones who need everything.

We are the rich man when we think we are self-sufficient, that we don't need to depend on God, that we are doing just fine by ourselves.

And we create our own places of torment by not accepting the gift of grace and mercy that God offers us over and over again.

We are Lazarus when we admit we can do nothing by our own strength, that we are so poor that even the dogs lick our sores and we need God to give us everything we need.

We are Lazarus when we are honest enough to admit that apart from God we are helpless and weak and starving for all that we need.

We are the rich man when we think of ourselves as independent. We are Lazarus when we understand that God is rich in everything we need, and when we wait outside the gates of heaven, he will not ignore us.

God will invite us inside and share with us the Kingdom of Heaven.

When we baptize babies, we are acknowledging that the child and also that we ourselves are helpless and weak and that we all rely on the grace of God to become the people that God created us to be, people with full, abundant lives, rich in relationship with the Holy, almighty God.

We are recognizing that God created us all and loves us all and continues to be active in our lives, seeking us when we stray, caring for us when we accept that care, and showing us a little piece of the Kingdom among us.

May God richly bless us all with love, grace, mercy, and strength, and may we learn to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength all the days of our lives and beyond.

Amen.