

The Rich Man and Lazarus

A young and successful executive was travelling down a neighbourhood street, going a bit too fast in his new Jaguar. He kept an eye out for children who might suddenly dart out from between parked cars and slowed down when he thought he saw something.

As his car passed, no children appeared. Instead, a brick smashed into the Jag's side door. He slammed on the brakes. A child ran out from the sidewalk, gesturing wildly. Jumping out of his car, the man shouted at the child. "What are you doing? This is a new car and that brick you threw is going to cost a lot of money. Why did you do it?"

"Please mister, please, I'm sorry, I didn't know what else to do," pleaded the youngster. "I threw the brick because no one else would stop." Tears dripped down the boy's chin as he pointed to the sidewalk behind him. "It's my brother. He rolled off the curb and fell out of his wheelchair and I can't lift him up. He's hurt and he's too heavy for me. Would you please help me?"

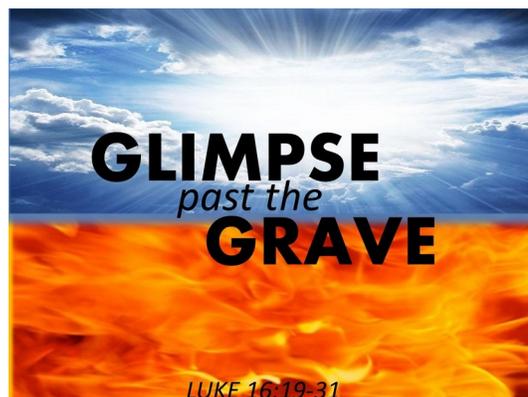
The man went to the curb and gently lifted the boy's brother back into the wheelchair, taking his handkerchief to wipe the boy's scrapes and cuts, checking to see that, otherwise, he was all right.

"Thank you," both boys said, and the man then watched the little boy push his brother down the sidewalk toward their home.

It was a long, slow walk back to his Jaguar. He never did repair the side door. He kept the dent to remind him not to go through life so fast that someone had to throw a brick at him to get his attention.

God whispers in our souls and speaks to our hearts. Sometimes when we don't have time to listen, He has to throw a brick at us. It's our choice to listen or not.

In Jesus' story today, God was trying to get the attention of the rich man. He threw a brick at him everyday. The brick's name was Lazarus. (*'Stopped by a Brick,' author unknown, adapted from motivateus.com*)



Our Gospel passage features a rich man, not just rich, but very rich: only the very wealthy could afford to wear purple and fine linen. And we have a very poor beggar at his gate named Lazarus, whom he ignores. “Every day the rich man walked past poor Lazarus without seeing him, without caring about his condition, without doing anything to help him. The rich man had plenty of opportunities to reach out, plenty of chances to help, and he ignored every one of them.” (*Minding the Gap* from *A Pastor Sings* blog, Rev. Jo Anne Taylor, 2022)

When they both die, their positions are reversed: the poor man finds himself in a place of comfort, to an honoured place beside Abraham, friend of God and the father of Israel (3:8, 13:28-29), while the rich man finds himself in Hades, a place of torment and eternal agony (16:23,25). It is only in death that he recognizes Lazarus, but still doesn't see him as an equal in God's eyes, twice asking Abraham to send Lazarus on errands for his own self-centred purposes, to quench his thirst and warn his five brothers to repent before it is too late.

But the die has been cast; the outcome is irreversible. Abraham refuses, reminding the rich man that he could have listened to Moses and the prophets when he was alive, but he chose greed and spiritual poverty instead.

This parable is about how we live ~ in the present ~ for what wealth does to us now, not as some way to ensure (or insure!) the future. Like last week's story (*Shrewd Steward or Dishonest Manager*, Luke 16:1-13) Jesus is once again trying to address heart attitude ~ compassion for the poor, being concerned for the position of others, not following the letter of the law, but the heart of the Law, having eyes that see the neighbour who needs help.

In Luke's Gospel, Lazarus is the only person whom Jesus names in his parables. A beggar, his name is a lofty one, based on the Hebrew name 'Eleazar', which means “God has helped.” Jesus gives him the dignity that life never afforded him.

Rev. Scott Hoezee notes: “The poor are not faceless people with no stories. The poor are real people with names, identities, and a history. They are not statistics, they are human beings. They are not a one-size-fits-all economic category that we can describe in broad strokes but specific individuals. The poor man had a name and packed into that fact is a whole lot of theology. Because we do overlook such people on the margins of life. We do act as though they are a socio-economic category more than families and folks with as real a life as anyone else. We forget that such people have names.” (*Commentary*, September 25, 2016, *Center for Excellence in Preaching*)

This tells us that no one, not even the lowliest of the poor, is invisible to God. And that is another point of this parable.

Jesus was addressing the Pharisees, “the lovers of money” (16:14-15) who thought that they would get into heaven because they were good men. After all, they were the religious leaders, always at the synagogue every time the doors opened; they studied the Torah and could quote lengthy sections of it. They participated in the annual feasts and holy days of the Jewish faith, and they gave ten percent or more of their income to the temple.

But, their religion was outward, with their rigid man-made rules, doing things right with no room for compassion and mercy, and as Jesus described them, “hypocrites.” (13:15)

Their love of money blinded them to God’s perspective. Jesus was condemning them for what they weren’t doing: showing mercy to the poor, seeking justice for the downtrodden.

Jesus was clear in his teaching, that following him required sharing riches with those in need, a theme echoed in today’s second reading from the First Letter of St. Paul to Timothy, which explicitly states, “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.” (v10) (adapted from Darryl Ward, sermoncentral.com) The Pharisees were in for a rude awakening if they did not repent and take heed of the true message of the Law and the Prophets before they died.

Luke’s parable of the rich man and Lazarus is timeless, and is applicable today. It speaks to each of us, especially those who have been blessed with privilege, money, talent, education, and more. There’s nothing wrong with being rich in any of these ways. It’s how we use our riches that matters eternally.

This story is not about solving world hunger and ending poverty, or about being part of some large scale answer to the world’s economic troubles. The story is asking us what are we doing with our wealth toward the people right in front of our eyes. Is the wealth that we are managing completely consumed on ourselves? Or are we using the wealth God has given us to do good wherever and whenever possible?

I will close this morning’s reflection with the words of St. Paul from our second reading:

As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life. (1Timothy 6:17-19)

Amen.

