

Lk. 16, 19-31: If I could live my life again...

Sermon at Dunn's Corner, Westerly, 9/29/2019

Intro

This is a tough story! This is not a Hollywood-story. It does not have a happy end! This is such a harsh story that I found myself thinking: *"I can't preach on a text like this, the first time I preach at Dunn's corner! This story is too condemning!"*

But then I read the story again and it started pulling at me. And I thought, well, the Gospel and Jesus' teaching is not about being nice, or polite, it's about being true. This is a radical story and a challenging one. A story that deserves our wrestling with it and figuring out: Why is THIS one of the parables that Jesus told his followers?

So, let me invite you all to struggle with me and engage this story about a rich man and the beggar.

The plot

We hear about the two main characters of this story, first: a very rich man who was dressed in expensive clothes, the purple that was at the time reserved only for kings and the most wealthy in society, and fine linen, the most precious clothing material one could find. The only other thing we hear about this man was that *"he lived in luxury every day."* What that means we can only guess: Did he have feasts every day? Did he have live music and dancers at his meals? Servants of course, a very large house. He lived a life of excessive luxury - and that is just about all we hear about him. He has no name. We don't know how he became rich. And we don't anything about his religious life, except that he was a Jew, because later on in the story he calls upon father Abraham. In our world he would be a multi-millionaire. I am sure it is easy for you all to imagine what a life of "excessive luxury" might look like in our society. Our media are full of such examples.

And then there is the other man, a beggar, so poor, that he had no home, so weak that he could not stand, so sick, that he had open sores that the stray dogs licked,

and so hungry, that he was longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. This homeless, uninsured, and uncared for man did have a name, his name was Lazarus. The meaning of the name Lazarus is: "God will help."

And so it occurred. When Lazarus died, the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The Greek original text actually speaks of Abraham's lap, like a father would hold a baby in his lap, Abraham is embracing Lazarus, holding him in his lap.

The millionaire also died and was buried. He however ended up in the Netherworld and there we hear that he was tormented. And now he did something he never did when he was still alive: He looked. And while he had never seen the homeless beggar Lazarus, who spent his days lying outside his own front gate, now he saw Lazarus. He saw him in Abraham's arms.

And being a faithful Jew he called in humility to Abraham and said: "*Father Abraham, have mercy on me!*" So now, in the hour of utter despair, he called out to Abraham. Now he was humble. Now he would have been content with just a drop of water from the finger of Lazarus. Now he was the desperate and needy one, now he, the millionaire, was the beggar!

But, now it was too late! Now he heard that the divide between heaven and the underworld, between Lazarus and him was absolute and could not be bridged. Abraham tells the formerly rich man in sober clarity that he had been given his chance, that he could have listened to Moses and the prophets, he could have followed the religious guidelines laid down in scripture. He was familiar with the ten commandments, he knew the Jewish laws that encourage people to give to the poor, feed the hungry, take care of the ill. This rich man, we hear, did none of that. And now it is too late. For him. And for his five brothers, who are headed in the same direction.

This story is about life!

So what this story of Lazarus and the very rich man is actually about is *not* what happens after death. This story talks about the death of these two men to shed light

on *life*! It wants to tell us: You have a choice! You know what you're supposed to do, it is all laid out for us, look at the holy scriptures! In the Gospel of Luke especially the emphasis is on the turning of the tides and setting right what is wrong. If you remember the famous Magnificat at the beginning of Luke's Gospel, young Maria's beautiful song of praise after the angel has visited her and told her that she would become pregnant. She burst into song:

*My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior (...)
He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty..."*

You see, the story of Lazarus is an example of God lifting up the humble and filling the hungry with good things - and sending the rich away empty. This story is telling us to be aware of how we are living! Are we in sync with this God of ours, who will lift up the poor and hungry? Are we participating in our God's great movement of love for this world? Are we caring for the helpless people in our country? The ones that are lying hungry or afraid at our doors? At our borders?

Seeing

The first step towards caring and participating in God's love is *seeing*! The very rich man did not even notice Lazarus lying there outside his house. He was so involved and caught up in his own life of luxury that he did not see. Do we see the beggars - when it is so uncomfortable to look them in the eyes? Do we see the homeless, the fugitives, the children in cages? Do we see the people hurting with a form of mental illness? Do we see people that are suffering quietly due to a new unfavorable diagnosis, or a loss of their job? Do we notice the people in our midst who have lost a beloved person in their life?

Regret

Seeing is the first step. We need to recognize something before we can do something about it. The very rich man in our story began looking when it was too late. And so I believe that this parable is about *regret*! If I had only looked earlier! If I had only realized what I was doing before today. Now, as he is being tormented by his regret, this man can't do anything about his lost opportunities any more. There comes a time when it is too late.

As you all may know I work in a large hospital in Boston as a hospital chaplain. A few weeks ago I visited a male patient who was 62 years old. He had suffered from alcohol abuse for many years, had quit and begun drinking again. Now he was in the hospital with cirrhosis of the liver. His liver was destroyed, his skin was yellow and he told me that he was just removed from the list for a liver-transplant because his organism was too weak to survive such a procedure - even if he was able to find a matching liver. This man just lost his last chance to survive. Now he was dying and knew that he had literally drunk himself to death. In our conversation he was telling me how much he wished he had stopped drinking earlier; how much he wanted to be present when his 22 y/o son would graduate from college! With tears in his eyes he said to me: *"I would so much like to change my life! If only I could live my life again! But not it's too late!"* I will not forget the pain with which he spoke this sentence. I was present when he had to say goodbye to his son on the phone a few days later!

This gentleman in his painful regret reminds me of the very rich man in our parable. It's not that he didn't know what he was doing. It's not that he didn't know he should stop drinking! But he chose to ignore these inner voices! He talked himself into continuing and that it would be somehow alright - until he saw - that it was too late!

Another chance

Another incredible story comes to mind that a patient told me some years back. This was a 51 y/o male patient who suffered from depression and had had a series of disheartening events happen all in short sequence, his partner left him, he had

financial problems, he lost his job and felt terribly lonely. So, one night, he decided to go the very top of a high building and he jumped off the roof to put an end to his misery. The moment after he had jumped, he knew it was wrong. But it was too late. He was hurtling downwards, past all these windows. And as he was falling down, regretting his decision, his life flashed past him. Like in a movie he could recall moments where he had been kind and helpful to other people, and when he had been nasty, mean and sometimes cruel. He saw all these events pass by in total clarity, knowing his life was over. Then a gust of wind came up and blew him off to the side a little. He crashed into a large treelike bush, a huge Rose of Sharon, that caught some of the power of the fall. He broke 37 bones in his body, but survived the fall, so he could tell me his story. As he shared this story and was wondering about the "new life" he was given, I asked him what he was going to do with his new life - once he got out of the hospital - which would, of course, take many months.

What I like about this amazing story is that in one way it was too late for this man: he could not go back behind his jump. And he had to deal with his broken body. But on the other hand he was given another chance. And so in a way he became like all of us, he was alive. He could choose how he was going to live from now on. He could think about what he was going to do and what not. So, I am going to ask *you* all that same question: What will you do with the life you have to live? What will you do when you get to rise each morning and meet another glorious fall day and decide where you want to take your life? What will you have the courage to look at and see? What will you not avoid this time? What will *you* do *to not* end up like our friend, the very rich man in Jesus' parable, who began to see when it was too late?

Friends, by grace we are lucky enough to be the five brothers our story talks about! We are the siblings that the rich man wanted Lazarus to warn after he realized what was happening to him. We are being warned by hearing this story! We are being told: "Don't waste your life!" Think well about how you want to be living!

In case you are wondering how my suicidal patient answered my questions: He said that he was so very grateful that he was still alive. That he was still breathing! That he could still see the sun rise and hear the birds sing and wonder as the leaves turned. He said he had realized that things he had given so much importance to, were not important. And that things he did not give sufficient importance to, were so very relevant! He said that he had realized that life was all about caring and being generous and kind towards other people!

I believe that when we join in God's movement of love and caring for our world, when we do our part in tending to our poor and needy and hurting fellow human beings, especially the helpless and marginalized ones, we will be blessed and infused with God's enlivening strength and God's Spirit of Life. We will experience the joy of sharing and the beauty of caring. We will get a glimpse of the fullness of life that Jesus promised his followers! And we will, hopefully, feel this immense peace of God that passes all human understanding in our hearts.

May it be so, for all of us,

Amen!