

You Must Go In Through The Door

Luke 16:19-31

September 26, 2010

I.

We all have seen him, haven't we? Perhaps he's sleeping on some newspapers in an alley. Or possibly crouched beside a fire burning weakly under bridge. If the deputies haven't sent him on his way he might be standing at Exit 16 as we get off to come to Diamondhead. And for many of us, even if we stick a bill in his cup we don't want to look him in the eye.

In a few minutes we will kneel and ask forgiveness for our sins, things done and left undone. As we offer our confessions we might not think about people like the poor man named Lazarus. And if at this point you think you know where this sermon is headed, you would be partially correct. But we also will see there is more than just the contrast between wealth and poverty.

But let's begin there. Today's Gospel offers a clear opportunity to talk about those around us who barely survive on the margins of life. It opens as a story about the rich and the poor, those who have and those who do not, and our call as Christians to reach out and help others.

And such a sermon on that subject would use Jesus as a model. It would point out that while he died to save us all, he lived to help the poor and needy. And it might conclude by calling us to follow his example and extend his love to others in our community.

You have heard me preach sermons like that in the past, and I am confident that you take them to heart. In fact, I believe that you all are generous and caring enough that you would help people in need even if I did not preach about it.

And so today, because our reading begins with examples of the rich and poor, I want to acknowledge once again the message of mercy and compassion that it naturally presents.

But the real message is not in how the story begins, but in how it ends. The first part of the parable described Lazarus and the rich man during their earthly lives. But that was just to set the stage. The actual plot began to develop during their eternal lives and the rich man's conversation with Abraham.

II.

Even so, we quickly can review the entire reading, which has three parts. The first describes an unnamed rich man who lived in luxury and splendor, and a pathetic soul named Lazarus who hung around the rich man's gate with sores on his body that were licked by dogs.

And I digress to make two points. This was not Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, whom Jesus raised from the dead. Lazarus was a common name in first century Palestine. Also, dogs were not generally household pets at the time, but were mostly feral and unclean. This is not an image of a warm friendly puppy soothing Lazarus' pain, but rather something more ominous.

The second part of the reading describes a reversal of fortune with the rich man suffering in Hades, and Lazarus in Paradise with Abraham. And even then, the rich man was not very repentant. In fact, he was somewhat presumptuous in asking Abraham to send Lazarus with water. And the imagery of the reading also portrayed a great uncrossable chasm dividing them.

Finally, the third part is about the rich man's request that Abraham send Lazarus to warn his brothers, who still were living, about avoiding the rich man's fate. And Abraham predictably explained the impossibility of granting that request.

And before we go further I should note that Jesus does not condemn wealth in this reading. Wealth is not a sin. In fact, Abraham during his life was a very wealthy man, and he was in heaven. The problem is not having wealth, but rather how we use it.

III.

So let's pick up the story with the rich man pleading to Abraham. Abraham responded with two points. First, he reminded the rich man that he had his good things during his life while Lazarus suffered, and now justice was being done in eternity. Let me elaborate on that.

This part of the reading brings forth the reality of future judgment based on decisions we make in this life. This can be an uncomfortable idea. Many contemporary Christians focus only on God's love and minimize the accountability to which we all will be called. They want to believe that God's love alone will save them.

But Scripture does not permit that type of wishful thinking. St. Paul made this point in Second Corinthians when he said, "All of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil" (5:10).

And it will not just be a black and white difference between obvious good and obvious evil, but also a time to answer for the gray areas. God said through the prophet Jeremiah, "I the Lord test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings" (17:10).

There are many similar passages in the Bible. And the clear message is that we, like the players in the parable of Lazarus and the rich man, will be responsible for the content of our lives. We will reap what we sow (Gal. 6:7).

Abraham's second point to the rich man was about the great chasm that existed between them. And here I might recall a well-known Gospel song that confirms the divide between rewards and punishment, but also can be the beginning of hope as we contemplate eternity.

Remember the old tune, "Rocka my soul in the bosom of Abraham?" I sang it at 4H camp when I was ten years old. Popular versions were recorded by Elvis, and Peter, Paul, and Mary, as well as several others.

This song was taken from today's biblical account of Lazarus resting in Abraham's arms. And the great chasm between Lazarus and the rich man was memorialized in its refrain. Remember that catchy part that proclaimed, "So high you can't get over it, so wide you can't get around it, so low you can't get under it, you must go in through the door."

And even though the chasm is impossibly high, wide, and low, there is hope. We can go in through the door. And this leads to the final part of the reading. How do we do that? How can we go in through the door?

IV.

The parable gives us the answer. The final conversation between the rich man and Abraham shows the way to the door. And we should note the rich man did not disagree with his fate, for he knew he failed to help Lazarus. He did not suggest a mistake had not been made, for he knew the truth. At no time did he say, "Get me outta here," for he knew he could not leave.

And so instead he expressed concern for his five surviving brothers. He asked Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers, who apparently were living like he lived, so they could repent and avoid the torment of Hades while there still was time for them.

Abraham's response brings us closer to the crux of this parable. Abraham saw no need to send Lazarus back into the world, and he pointed out that his brothers had Moses and the prophets to guide them. And of course, the term "Moses and the prophets" was another way of referring to Holy Scripture.

But look at what happened next. The rich man was not at all confident that his brothers would just suddenly start reading Scripture. He knew them too well. They would need persuasion. And so he told Abraham that someone, such as Lazarus, would have to go to his brothers from the dead in order to really get their attention.

And Abraham did not buy it. He said that if the brothers' faith did not lead them to read Scripture on their own in order to learn God's will for his people, they would not be convinced if someone rose from the dead to tell them.

V.

Now we're getting there. That is a major point among several points in this reading. We all are called to the truth and authority of the Bible. And if some, like the rich man's brothers, reject the authority of scripture then they, as Abraham said, will not be convinced if someone rises from the dead to tell them.

There is an eternal truth there for Christians today, isn't there? We are to trust in God's Word, and live in God's will. The wealth that is found in Scripture is far more important than wealth derived from the world.

But those two notions of wealth are not in conflict, even though they are in tension. God blesses us and gives us wealth. An average family of two in Mississippi has a household income more than 98% of the world. And census data shows that average income in Diamondhead is substantially higher. And that is a good thing. God wants us to prosper and be well.

But he also wants us to honor him in return, and to use our wealth for God's purposes as well as our own. The rich man in today's Gospel is a good example of how not to do that. He thought only of himself. And apparently his brothers were like him.

And so while some people might read today's Gospel as a commentary on the social problems of wealth and poverty, it really is a commentary on the spiritual issue of using our resources and blessings as God intends.

Earlier I quoted some difficult passages from Paul's letters and the Old Testament about the eternal consequences of how we show our faith in the way we live. Jesus also spoke to the same in Matthew's Gospel when he said, "For the Son of man will come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what they have done" (16:27).

That is the teaching of today's reading. We are responsible in the hereafter for what we do in the here and now. This means that we all called to care for each other, and also are called to respond to God for the blessings he has given us.

And there is no way around it. It is too high to get over, too wide to get around, and too low to get under. We must go in through the door. *Amen.*