

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Luke 16:19-31, Lazarus and Dives

PRAYER OF THE DAY (Lent 3)

☐ Eternal Lord, your kingdom has broken into our troubled world through the life, death, and resurrection of your Son. Help us to hear your Word and obey it, so that we become instruments of your redeeming love; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

HOLY SCRIPTURELuke 16:19-31, KJV

There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day: ²⁰And there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, which was laid at his gate, full of sores, ²¹And desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table: moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. ²²And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom: the rich man also died, and was buried; ²³And in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. ²⁴And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame. ²⁵But Abraham said, Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented. ²⁶And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence. ²⁷Then he said, I pray thee therefore, father, that thou wouldest send him to my father's house: ²⁸For I have five brethren; that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment. ²⁹Abraham saith unto him, They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them. ³⁰And he said, Nay, father Abraham: but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent. ³¹And he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.

Introduction to the hymn: I chose this lovely hymn especially for the sake of verse 3, which speaks of "holy charity" and of a "true lowliness of heart, which takes the humbler part." I believe that this evening's Gospel story calls us to such holy charity.

HYMN LBW 508, *Come Down, O Love Divine.*

SERMON

In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day: ²⁰And there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, which was laid at his gate, full of sores... (Luke 16:19-20, KJV)

We need not suppose the rich man in this story to be a bad man. He wears purple and fine linen, but so do some bishops in this world. And he eats sumptuously every day, but anyone who eats well and reliably each day eats “sumptuously” compared to the tens of millions of people on earth who will go to bed hungry this evening.¹ And though the rich man was careless and indifferent toward the beggar, he did not drive him away. It might have embarrassed the rich man when his guests arrived to have a beggar lying at the gate, but the rich man put up with that. Who knows? Maybe the rich man knew the poor man’s name and chatted with him from time to time, in a neighborly way.

But if so, if the rich man was an ordinary man in many respects, this all seems to increase the urgency of this parable. None shall slip by our Final Judge. Not one of us shall go unexamined. Hell threatens not simply the worst of humanity, but even the respectable folk of this world. And so, in this evening’s story, we find that hell has room for this rich man, who, as far as we can tell, was a respectable citizen tolerant of the beggar at his gate. As someone said,

‘It was not what Dives did that got him into jail; it was what he did not do that got him into hell.’²

My sermon this evening seems to amount to two laments. First, I regret along with many of you a kind of dearth on earth of sympathy for our fellow man. There is much wealth in this world, but amidst that wealth, there is also a poverty—a poverty of sympathy. If we are not careful, we are going to get used to it and think it okay. And my second lament is that we too often fail to think of heaven. We become so preoccupied with daily life that we forget to live for eternity. But that is what this particular parable is all about. The rich man and

¹ WorldHunger.org estimates that there were 925 million hungry people in the world in 2010: http://www.worldhunger.org/articles/Learn/world%20hunger%20facts%202002.htm#Number_of_hungry_people_in_the_world

² William BARCLAY (2012-06-25). The Gospel of Luke (Daily Study Bible Series) (Kindle Locations 4494-4495). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

the poor man live their lives, and perhaps no one much criticizes either one of them. But still there is eternity ahead of us. We deprive ourselves of a both comfort and moral awakening when we forget about our life to come after these threescore and ten years.

SHORTAGE OF SYMPATHY

So, let's turn to the first lament: sorrow for a shortage of sympathy on earth. The story of Lazarus and the rich man is a parable in favor of fellow-feeling. It favors that idealism we might have had when we were children. My wife's first ambition, for example, was to be a missionary to Africa. You're not likely to get rich that way, but still, there was a time when mothers and fathers raised their children to think that serving humanity was important.

Our Lutheran doctrine of the "priesthood of all believers" forbids us to praise the vocation of missionary or priest or monk above other vocations in this world. So long as a job is legal, it is radiant with holiness. It is our individual setting in life for loving our neighbor by doing good work, by witnessing to Jesus through a Christ-like life, and loving God through working in his name. So, all jobs in this world are a chancel. They are a place for holy labors.

And yet, some jobs are especially oriented toward helping other people. I worry about some of those jobs. Seminaries, monasteries, and convents are too often dying these days. Do we have enough firemen in this world? I hope so. Do the vocations of teaching, nursing, social work, and politics draw some of our best people and brightest minds?

It is an old rule of political theory that all societies depend upon the voluntary, almost instinctive obedience of their citizens to the laws of the land. No society can long endure that depends entirely upon the coercive power of its police force. Good communities depend on vast resources of voluntary obedience to the laws of the land.

But something similar can be said about compassion. Good societies need kind-hearted people. We pay our taxes because we are compelled to by the laws of the land. But to the degree that our taxes fund the commonwealth that takes care of the frail people of our land, perhaps we should be grateful for our taxes. Sympathy for those in need could well move us to be fair and square in paying our taxes.

The reality of the commonwealth is a huge factor in favor of the beggar at the gate. Our land has a government and a tradition of compassion that protects and helps the frail in ways that go far beyond the practices in other times and places.

Still, our land needs sympathy for one another that goes beyond obeying our laws and paying our taxes. During Hurricane Sandy, for example, we had

people in our congregation who climbed various flights of stairs in their building in order to check on elderly neighbors, to bring them some soup, or to run errands for them. Lazarus lay at their gate and they did something about it. Our land needs such sympathy for others. It always will.

Note that we do not need to be wealthy to be compassionate on others. As Matthew Henry put it when talking about the needy:

“...those that cannot lend them a penny should lend them a hand”

Think of Dorcas, for example. We do not know whether or not she was a wealthy woman. But we do know that she could stitch clothes for others. And she did. She did what she could. And when she died, both heaven and earth honored her:

So Peter rose and went with them. And when he had come, they took him to the upper room. All the widows stood beside him weeping, and showing tunics and other garments which Dorcas made while she was with them. (Acts 9:39, RSV)

There is something about our modern times that tempts us toward indifference akin to that of the rich man in this evening's parable. We walk on the sidewalks and sit on the subways with iPods, listening to our music. No need to talk to us. We are listening to our music. We talk aloud on the sidewalks, but not with the passerby right there before our eyes, but with someone distant via our iPhones. We don't much need to go to movie theatres anymore and mix with the crowds. Eventually the movie will reach Netflix. Our high-definition televisions give us views of the close play at third base that go beyond what we could see if we were at the stadium itself. Besides the distancing affect of all our technology, there is simply the press of humanity upon us in the city, and the sense that it is overwhelming and that we are playing with a tiger to even try to help. So, we don't. Except that this evening's parable asks us to pick and try again. Try again to look at Lazarus at the gate and to help him some in this world.

SECOND, REMEMBER ETERNITY

My second lament is worry for our land that we might be forgetting eternity. In the story, the rich man dies and the poor man dies. Death is their great leveler. The rich man's funeral might be splendid, with fine speeches and yummy reception and all that, while the poor man might simply be shoved into

a hole in potter's field. But for both the rich man and the poor man, they are beyond caring about the splendor or the baseness of their funerals. They face a much bigger question now. Our parable asks them and asks us to think on these things even now, before we take leave of this present life.

In this world, there are robbers and murders and bullies and thugs galore, and they are going to have to deal with Jesus one day. But notice that in the great parable of the Last Judgment, those whom the King sends away are not pirates or robbers or murders or thugs. They are simply people who failed to show much sympathy for their neighbors in this world:

⁴¹Then he will say to those at his left hand, "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴²for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, ⁴³I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." ⁴⁴Then they also will answer, "Lord, when did we see thee hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to thee?" ⁴⁵Then he will answer them, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me." ⁴⁶And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.
(Matthew 25:41-46, RSV)

The golden art of being a Christian is that we should develop the reflex of remembering eternity:

¹⁹If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable. (1 Corinthians 15:19, KJV)

There is more to life than these present years. We should also take stock of eternity and how we are preparing ourselves for that long run. For both our comfort and our spiritual renewal, we should remember that as the rich man was forced to give an account of himself, so will we one day.

IN WHAT DOES THIS CONSIST?

As for what it means to remember eternity, I think it gets down to remembering our God and what matters to him. The thing about Lazarus lying at the gate is that he is one of God's creations! Dare we despise anything made by our God?

And not only this. Not only should we remember the dignity of all that God has made, but also we should remember our Lord Jesus Christ. He devoted his life to compassion on others. He surrendered his glory out of sympathy directed toward us:

⁹For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. (2 Corinthians 8:9, RSV)

You that can help others, do so, following the pattern of our Lord Jesus. And you that suffer, do not despair. There is heaven! There is an eternity ahead and it is in the hands of the true Man of Compassion, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.