

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

September 25, 2022 (Proper 21, Year C)
Luke 16:19-31

Some years ago, before the death of Mother Teresa, a television special depicted the grim human conditions that were a part of her daily life. It showed all the horror of the slums of Calcutta and her LOVE for those destitute people. The producer interviewed her as she made her rounds in that dreadful place. As always, of course, throughout the program, commercials interrupted the flow of the discussion. Here's the sequence of the topics and the commercials that followed: lepers (then a commercial for bikinis on sale); mass starvation (then a commercial for designer jeans); agonizing poverty (then a commercial for fur coats); abandoned babies (a commercial for ice cream sundaes) the dying (a commercial for diamond watches).

The irony was so apparent. Two different worlds were on display – the world of the poor and the world of the wealthy. It seems that our very CULTURE is teaching us to live like the Rich Man in the story of Lazarus. Occasionally we see images of the poor man Lazarus at our gate, but only as something to AVOID. We're IMMEDIATELY reminded of the next CAR we ought to buy, and the next MEAL we should eat. We're slowly and methodically told that it's okay to live OUR life of luxury while others live THEIR life of poverty.

There was a Garfield the Cat cartoon I saw once. One cold winter night Garfield looks out the window and sees Odie the Dog peering in the window. Garfield thinks to himself: "This is horrible. Here I am in the comfort of a warm house, well fed, and there is Odie outside begging to get in, cold and hungry. I can't stand it anymore. I just can't stand it." So at that, Garfield the Cat goes over to the window...and closes the curtains.

That's what the rich man does to poor Lazarus in our parable. Rather than HELPING him, he simply closed the curtains.

They were NEIGHBORS, you know. The Rich Man and Lazarus, they saw each other EVERY DAY. Oh, they never SPOKE, but there WAS contact. Every day the Rich Man SAW this beggar at his front gate. But he either dismissed him as a non-person, or ignored him in contempt and disgust. He couldn't see beyond his OWN material WEALTH. He was too absorbed in what HE had to notice the needs of those AROUND him. And when you lose sight of your NEIGHBOR, you lose sight of GOD too.

Lazarus was not only homeless, but crippled. Literally, he "had been laid" at the gates of the rich man's house. It's a passive verb, "HAD BEEN laid" — he didn't get there by his OWN power; he was PUT there by others. He didn't even have the strength to shoo away the dogs that licked his sores. The dogs probably stole the little food he'd begged for too. Ironically, the DOGS were more aware of Lazarus' wounds than the RICH man ever was.

But then Jesus describes an abrupt and dramatic reversal of fortune. Each of the men dies. Lazarus was carried away by the angels to heaven, to be with Abraham. In the end, Lazarus BECAME the RICH one.

All that Jesus says about the RICH man is that he was BURIED. Isn't it strange that's ALL he says? After all, the festivities of HIS FUNERAL must have been something the community would REMEMBER for YEARS. But apparently, that fact didn't IMPRESS JESUS. Oh, and Jesus DID add one ADDITIONAL fact about the rich man's death: HIS soul went to HELL. In the end HE became the BEGGAR.

Abraham says that between people, between heaven and hell, "a great chasm has been fixed." But GOD didn't put it there; the RICH man did, WE did, and we DO. We construct it in LIFE, by ignoring the needs of others, and, in DEATH, we're TORMENTED by that chasm—a hell of our own making. Even in HELL, the rich man thinks that Lazarus ought to SERVE HIM. He was ENTITLED to

treat people HOWEVER he wanted in life, and in death, he DIDN'T CHANGE. Even looking UP to HEAVEN, he STILL felt ENTITLED to treat Lazarus like a slave.

No one can CROSS that chasm, but JESUS already HAS. He died for us. He descended to HELL for OUR sins, but HE rose again. He CROSSED that chasm. And he can bring US WITH him.

As Jesus tells this story, he's not saying that WE are this PARTICULAR rich man; we're more like the five BROTHERS of the rich man. We still HAVE the opportunity to change. We're LEARNING to FEEL the pain of Lazarus. We're learning to hear the grief of those who suffer. We're learning to follow the example of Jesus, who entered INTO pain, and gave it a voice, and gave it a NAME. The name Lazarus LITERALLY MEANS "God is my help." It's the ONLY name given to ANYONE in ANY of Jesus' parables. It's the only WAY ANY of us makes it to heaven – to say, like Lazarus, "God is my help."

What's that you say? What's this story have to do with you? You're NO rich man? Well, from the standpoint of material wealth, we Americans have a hard time REALIZING just how RICH we really are. The truth is: enough food is produced in the world to feed every man, woman, and child on this planet. God provides our daily bread, and God has given us enough. And yet, statistically, on average, for every breath we take, a CHILD DIES somewhere in the world – EVERY breath, a child dies. (Heave a sigh) That was another child's life, and that goes on day and night. Bread for the World estimates that an American city throws away as GARBAGE enough food to supply an entire EUROPEAN city of the same size, and a EUROPEAN city throws away enough food to feed an Asian or African city of the same size. We ask HOW God can ALLOW such suffering in the world, but God looks at us and asks, "How can YOU?"

You may look at your neighbor and think that YOUR story is SEPARATE from his story or her story, but WE ARE CONNECTED. It's undeniable. Our individual stories intertwine in ways we can't even see, but the PUBLISHER of our stories, the one who writes them in the book of life, knows that EACH of us affects the OUTCOME of our NEIGHBOR'S story.

There's a story that came out of September 11th. When one of the towers came down, there was a man who got caught in the rubble, and as the ash cloud came over him, it got so dark that he thought he'd gone blind. But then he saw a light. It was a flashlight, and he saw a hand reaching for him, and he heard a voice that simply said, "grab on." He grabbed the hand, and as he was being pulled out of the rubble, he felt someone else grab his other hand, and on it went. A whole CHAIN of people were SAVED that day by one light, and one hand, and one voice saying, "grab on." They never even saw his FACE, he was off to help OTHER people.

(Go to the baptismal font and dip hand in the water.) This is where GOD reaches down for US, and pulls us up, and saves us. Dip hand in the water.) This is where God cleanses OUR wounds and cools our tongues. This is where we see the light of CHRIST, and this is where we hear that voice saying, "Grab on, I've got you."

And out there in the world is where we reach down to help the NEXT person. That's what DISCIPLES DO – we reach down and help the NEXT person, because Christ first reached down for us. Amen.