



The Other Lazarus

Several days ago an interesting link to a news article popped up on my phone. The title of the article, *The Dark Side of Being Rich*, intrigued me. My first reaction was to wonder, *wait, what? There's a dark side to being rich?* (Since reading the article I have been unable to find the link again so I am unable to provide it for you, unfortunately.) The author of the article listed several reasons as to why there is a dark side to being rich, and the most interesting to me was his contention that wealth – especially great wealth – tends to lead people into extreme self-interest, which leads them away from concern for those who struggle in life.

There is something about human nature, especially when combined with nearly unlimited resources, that tends to favor a path of self-interest. With great resources I may be satisfied to simply indulge myself in my personal desires without regard to the needs and concerns of others. The greater the resources, we can say, the greater the odds that we will travel the path of self-interest. Some people, admittedly, might say this is nature's way of programming us for survival. After all, they might say, it has taken a certain level of self-interest over the millennia to ensure the survival of the human race. The gospel message, however, tells us something very different. The gospel message challenges us to understand that the health, and indeed the future, of the human race necessitates that we care for one another and not simply care for ourselves. We are, in essence, our the keepers of our brothers and sisters.

This morning we are talking about *The Other Lazarus*. We are very familiar with the character of Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, whom Jesus resurrected from the dead, as told in John chapter 11. In this morning's Scripture passage, we find another character named Lazarus. He is one of two characters in this parable Jesus tells, as found in Luke 16:19-31 –

19 "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day.

20 At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores

21 and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

22 "The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried.

23 In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side.

24 So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.'

25 “But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony.
26 And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’
27 “He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family,
28 for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’
29 “Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’
30 “‘No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’
31 “He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

In this parable we are told of a rich man, a man rich enough to pursue what he wanted in life. He lived a life of luxury and though it seemed he had everything, in the end he lost his soul, which is one of the great warnings of Jesus (*What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? Matthew 16:26*).

This is a very common theme in the teaching of Jesus – the danger of having so much but in the process losing one’s soul. A common theme of the gospels could be called *be careful what you wish for*, because the things we so often desire – such as riches – are, in the eyes of Jesus, very dangerous. I should note that the Bible does not say, as many people assume, that *money is the root of all evil*. What the Bible says is this – *the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs* (I Timothy 6:10). The Bible does not condemn money and wealth as much as it offers warnings about its dangers. Much of Luke’s gospel, in fact, centers on this warning – wealth can be very dangerous. It’s not that Jesus is condemning of wealth in and of itself; but he recognizes the many dangers riches and wealth pose for us. That is why, in chapter 12 of Luke Jesus tells us that *a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions* (Luke 12:15) and that we should work toward *treasure in heaven* (Luke 12:34).

In verse 19 we are introduced to the rich man. The rich man *lived in luxury every day* (verse 19). He dresses, Jesus says, in very fine clothing and *lived in luxury every day*. *Architectural Digest* would photograph this man’s home and *GQ* would put him on the cover. This is the guy who would be the envy of everyone because *he had it all*. It wasn’t an occasional indulgence, but indulgence was the order of every day.

The second character introduced by Jesus is Lazarus, and there couldn’t be a greater difference between the lives of these two men. While the rich man enjoys great wealth Lazarus leads a pitiful existence. He is in such poor health someone has to carry him each day and lay him at the gate of the rich man, in hopes that he will receive at least some pittance of aid. To add insult to injury, he is covered with sores and is so weak he could not keep away the dogs that came to lick his sores. Not a pretty picture. It is very easy to recoil and protest against the graphic nature of this description, but Jesus wants to lift the veil to disclose reality. Resources, especially when they are vast, can remove and isolate us from what constitutes reality for so many.

While the financial distance between these two men was unimaginably wide, the physical distance was not. Every day, as he walked through the gate of his home, the rich man would have to walk by Lazarus. It wasn’t that the rich man had to venture out in the world to find poverty; poverty was literally on his doorstep. We don’t have to travel far to find poverty either, as it is at our doorstep as well. Kentucky has the 5th highest level of poverty among the fifty states. A little more than 823,000 Kentuckians, or 19.4 percent of the state’s population, suffer through poverty (that compares to 15.9 percent nationally). And this does not include the thousands more who are barely above the poverty line and live lives that are very precarious financially.

<http://wkyufm.org/post/us-census-bureau-kentucky-has-fifth-highest-poverty-rate-nation#stream/0>.

If we condense Kentucky's population into our congregation this morning, forty out of every two hundred people (two hundred being our average worship attendance) live in poverty, so we could basically take most of one of our three sections of seats this morning and consider them as living below the poverty line. That brings things home in a more realistic way, doesn't it?

One of the dangers of wealth, and the rich man in this parable is an example, is the insulation it provides from reality. Even though the rich man was not a great physical distance from Lazarus, he was so insulated from physical need that he became self-absorbed and was, as my mom would say, unable to see beyond the end of his own nose. He was not only indifferent to the need of Lazarus; evidently, he was blind to the existence of Lazarus. If this rich man noticed Lazarus at all, it was probably to complain about having to step over him or walk around him when he left his home.

But Jesus puts a face, and a name, on poverty. Though the rich man is not named in the parable he is usually called Dives, which is Latin for *rich*. In this parable the poor man has a name while the rich man goes unnamed. Isn't that interesting? It is the poor who are the nameless and the faceless in society. We know the names of the rich – Bill Gates, Warren Buffett – because you can be famous simply because you are rich. Has anyone ever become famous because of their poverty? No, because the poor are anonymous. (There are people who happened to be both poor and famous – such as Mother Teresa and Mahatma Gandhi, but they were known for their work with and for the poor, as well as their advocacy of non-violence. They were poor, yes, but that is not the reason for which they were well known). No one has ever gained fame because of poverty. But here, in this parable, the poor man is the one given a name and the rich man is anonymous. When you name the poor, they become real. Jesus gave the poor man a name – Lazarus, which means *God is my help*. Jesus gave Lazarus a name because the poor mattered to Jesus.

To make the poor person the hero in the parable would be a shock to those listening to Jesus, but it was an even greater shock that one as pitiful as Lazarus would be granted the seat of honor in eternity – verse 22 says he was seated at *Abraham's side*. And what a jolt for the rich man, as the tables for these two men are turned once they were in eternity.

Jesus was always reversing the standards and ways of the world – *the last will be first, and the first will be last* (Matthew 20:16); *the greatest among you will be your servant* (Matthew 23:11); and *for whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it* (Matthew 16:25). Here, in keeping with the way Jesus often presented an opposite way of thinking, it is the poor man who was deemed as righteous. In the day of Jesus the rich were seen as righteous because they were rich. If you were poor it was because God had chosen not to bless you, so if you were poor it was your fault. It was a first-century version of today's *prosperity Gospel*. If you are wealthy, it is because God has blessed you. If you are not wealthy, you must have done something wrong. Who often gets blamed for poverty today? The poor. They are blamed for their condition because, as we often hear, they are lazy, they're not interested in education, they manage their money badly, etc. There are some cases where that may be true, but we can't forget that there are powerful forces that structure society in ways that make it very difficult to escape poverty. The poor may be poor not through any fault of their own but because of the economic injustice that is so prevalent in our world. Blaming the poor for their plight is not only tragic; it is also one way to escape any sense of obligation to reach out to them and minister to them. In our society, we often like to proclaim how we have *pulled ourselves up by our bootstraps*. But what if you don't have any boots, let alone the bootstraps that go along with them? It is a mostly mistaken assumption to believe that we get to where we are in life purely by our own hard work and initiative. I did not. I am blessed to have a wonderful support system that has helped me throughout my life. I was born into a family that had the resources to provide me with not only my needs, but many extras as well and, very importantly, to see that I was able to get a quality education. All along the way I had the benefit of mentors and benefactors who have helped me in so many ways. There are rare individuals who accomplish a good deal in life solely on their own merits and efforts, but

the truth is, most of us get to where we are because we are blessed with a great deal of help and are given a start in life far ahead of many people in our world. So we must resist the temptation to place blame upon people for their difficulties in life and, at the same time, we must recognize and give thanks for the help that we have received.

Opportunity to help Lazarus came every day to the rich man but he was indifferent to it. Lazarus is need personified but his need was ignored by the rich man. It's not that the rich man was cruel to Lazarus. He did not curse him as he stepped around him at the gate of his home or treat him in an ill manner. The tragedy of the rich man was that he simply didn't notice Lazarus. Lazarus was not part of the rich man's landscape and it seemed perfectly acceptable that while he wined and dined and lived in luxury that Lazarus should live in such poverty and misery. Interestingly, someone shared with me a great observation about this parable after the early service. Even in eternity, they observed, the rich man could only see Lazarus as one who ought to be serving him. *24 So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.'* *25 "But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. 26 And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.'* *27 "He answered, 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, 28 for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.'"*

Notice in verses 24 and 27 the rich man was requesting that Lazarus be put to work to help him. That's a fascinating insight, I think, and I appreciated hearing it.

Early in my ministry here, I told a story about an experience I had while in seminary. I'm going to repeat the story, but with a portion that I had not shared the first time I told the story. But first, I want to quote some song lyrics. The band in which I play, Hush Harbor, has a new singer, Aaron Crane. Aaron is the worship leader at Northeast Christian Church in Louisville and is not only a great singer, but a very fine songwriter as well. Aaron has written a song title *People Like That*, which speaks to not only this parable, but also an experience I had related to the story which I am about to tell (you can hear Aaron's song here – <https://youtu.be/6zDMq5q4yMM>). The lyrics are as follows –

Verse 1

*Wind torn shoes and a t-shirt twice his size
He saw quiet desperation pouring from that child's eyes
Mom and Dad had his hand and a shopping cart they called home
Then the light turned green and then he just drove on*

Chorus 1

*He said, I got a think about myself,
There's no time for no one else
Oh, people like that. Yeah, people like that.
No matter what I do or what I say.
It won't make a difference any way.
Oh, people like that. Yeah, people like that.*

Bridge

*Just one more thing, I'm not to blame
Oh, for people like that, people like that.
Yeah, people like that, people like that.*

Verse 2

*There's times in my life, I was once there too
Been all of them even walked in their shoes
The privileged and rich the cast in the ditch
Aren't really that far apart.
Without love and kindness in their heart.*

Chorus 2

*We gotta open our eyes and open our ears,
To the pain and the suffering and all the tears from people like that.
Yeah, people like that.
Cause what we do and what we say, can make a difference why I'm here today, for people like that.
Oh people like that.*

Outro

*We all want to feel love not just despair and shame
It starts with me and you too, let's be the change
Oh cause we all gotta a name
We're all, people like that. People like that.
Ooh, people like that. People like that.
Oh, people like that. Yeah, people like that.
Ooh, people like that. Yeah, people like that.
Getta a little love and hope and faith, people like that.*

When I was in seminary I had a class that was about experiencing the realities of life and ministry. One of three very interesting and required projects was something called The Plunge. We were asked to refrain from shaving and bathing for most of a week, to put on old clothes, and then were left in downtown Louisville for a weekend with nothing but one piece of identification and one dollar. Do you know where you go to eat when you have one dollar? White Castle. At that time, which was 1983, you could get a meal for a dollar. But a dollar's worth of food from White Castle won't get you through an entire weekend. Not only were meals a concern, but finding a place to sleep was very much a concern as well. I slept on a pile of plywood in the foundation of the Galt House East, which was under construction at the time. I thought it was nice to tell the rest of the class that I stayed at the Galt House.

On Saturday I was really hungry, and I met two young men about my age who had been living on the streets for quite a while. They told me they would take me to a mission that served good food, and I was very appreciative of their help. I have to say, being a somewhat picky eater, that the meal I received was one of the best meals I have ever been given. When you're hungry, you find that you get far less picky about what you will eat. Those two young men were really helpful to me, and I was grateful for their help and for the assistance that I received from that mission.

The next week, as I was driving through downtown Louisville making a delivery for work, I looked out the window and saw one of those two young men walking down the street. This was someone who took me in and helped me when I was vulnerable, and I felt a sudden stab of compassion and, a measure of guilt, as I was able to go back to my life. I stopped at a traffic light and wondered what I should do, and just like the character in Aaron's song, when the light turned green, I went on my way. After all these years – 34 years – I still feel guilty and wonder what happened to those two young men, and I wonder what I could have done to help them.

There are few ways in which the church can be as powerfully like Jesus as when they love and care for the poor. What is God saying to us about the poverty in our world? Do we hear God telling us that

life is not about amassing for ourselves while others are suffering in poverty? This is more than a parable; it is a warning, and one I hope that we heed.