

Pentecost 19C (9/25/2016)

Amos 6:1a, 4-7

Psalm 146

1 Timothy 6:6-19

**Luke 16:19-31**

*There is a great distance between those for whom suffering is a constant reality in this life and those who neglect them. We are blind to the hurt in our world, and our blindness only serves to perpetuate it. But, God comes among us one who suffers and draws us together in his name. And, we share in the suffering of Lazarus because we know that God has shared in ours, and made a way for life beyond it.*

Lazarus? More like Lazy-rus. If he would just pick himself up off the sidewalk and do an honest day's work, he would be able to get out of poverty. That is, if he really wants to. You know, most of those people would rather just stay on the street. That way, they don't have to do anything; they can just live off the charity they get from the bleeding hearts. He probably doesn't mind those sores all over his body, either. They just make people feel sorry for him, so they're more likely to give him something. But as long as we keep enabling people like that, they'll never learn responsibility. In any case, there will always be people who are poor, so nothing we do will really make a difference anyway.

*I wonder how all those rationalizations will hold up in hell.*

That's one way to approach the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in our Gospel from Luke today. The implication is stark: those who suffer want in this life will be comforted in the next, whereas those who enjoy abundance in this life will undergo suffering in the next. Jesus does not portray the rich man as particularly wicked, so his fiery destiny is not so much a punishment as it is simply a divine reversal: "Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things,

and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony.” It’s the kind of reversal Mary sings about in the first chapter of Luke: “[God] has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; [God] has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”<sup>1</sup> **The promise of eternal consolation for Lazarus is certainly good news for the poor, precisely the good news Jesus insists on preaching.**<sup>2</sup> But what about those of us who have more than we need? Even if we’re not draped in luxury, does Jesus’ parable suggest that we, too, are fated for an undesirable afterlife, if proportionately less miserable than that of the rich man?

Let me say first that I don’t believe we ought to read this parable literally, as though it’s a blueprint for what eternity truly holds for each of us, rich or poor. That would be a strange kind of grace. But, don’t let that observation temper **the severity of Jesus’ judgment on earthly injustice.** Every detail in the story is deliberately exaggerated<sup>3</sup> in order to draw our attention to the painful absurdity of a world where abject poverty coincides with superfluous wealth. So, the parable is not about the afterlife at all, but rather the here and now. **The rich man’s torturous hell is but a dramatic reflection of the hell that Lazarus lived every day outside his gate. And the “great chasm” fixed between heaven and hell is no greater than the gap between the privileged and the poor in this life, even if one resides only a few short steps from the other.**

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 1:52-53.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 4:18.

<sup>3</sup> See Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 605.

At its heart, then, Jesus' striking parable speaks to the persistent tragedy of abundant life withheld from countless children of God, and the failure of others to take note. There is a great distance, a "chasm," between those for whom suffering is a constant reality in this life and those who neglect them. **The hallowed pursuit of self-sufficiency has a tendency to divert our attention away from the vulnerable people all around us, and like the rich man, we simply fail to see Lazarus. We are blind to the hurt in our world, and our blindness only serves to perpetuate it.**

But our blindness is voluntary. We know that Lazarus is in agony just beyond the scope of our daily lives; we just can't bring ourselves to look him in the eye. He is the solitary senior citizen on a fixed income, for whom adequate housing and care is out of reach. He is the low-wage migrant worker without the protections of citizenship, yet who guarantees us a low price on our tomatoes. He is the single mother forced to choose between groceries and the power bill at the end of the month. He is the community of color harmed by law enforcement at a disproportionate rate.

**Strangely, for some us the discomfort of Lazarus' predicament hardens our hearts, and we rush to explain it away.** Jesus doesn't mention how Lazarus arrived at his place outside the rich man's gate, but some of us are intent on filling in the gaps, laying the responsibility for his suffering squarely at his feet. **And, while the rest of us do not disparage Lazarus, we are nonetheless paralyzed by his presence, uncertain how to respond to another person's pain, and fearful of what it would mean to let our compassion guide us.**

We may, in fact, sympathize with Lazarus, but as theologian James Cone so pointedly puts it, “Sympathy does not change the structures of injustice.”<sup>4</sup> Charitable feelings do not lift Lazarus up off his back, heal his sores, or fill his stomach. It’s not enough to simply be aware of him on the periphery. No, **the challenge of Jesus’ parable is to look at Lazarus without turning away, to intentionally bridge the distance between us, and to bear his burden with him.**

Dear church, we have Moses and the prophets to guide us, as Abraham reminds the rich man, but we also have the witness of one who has gone to the cross ahead of us and risen from the dead to cast a vision of the abundant life God intends for everyone. **There’s no guarantee that coming into contact with suffering will not hurt, but the crux of our faith is that God comes among us one who suffers and draws us together in his name. Since Christ chooses to be found in the person of Lazarus, that’s precisely where we expect to see him. And, we share in the suffering of Lazarus because we know that God has shared in ours, and made a way for life beyond it.**

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<sup>4</sup> *God of the Oppressed*, 135.