

“What Will You Do For Lazarus?”

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Luke 16:19-31

I Timothy 6:6-19

We live in an age of entitlement! Almost everyone thinks they are entitled to something. I came across a quote of Charles W. Bray, III, Deputy Director of the U.S. Internal Communication Agency who wrote, **“We have come to a time where we say, ‘You deserve a break today.’ Too many of us believe that. If we’re poor, we deserve welfare; if we’re rich, we deserve a tax break; if we are workers, we deserve better fringe benefits; if we own a Chrysler, we deserve a bail-out, if we are a special interest, we deserve a special hearing.”** (Quote magazine, January 15, 1981, in The Communicator’s Commentary on Luke, Vol. 3, page 236, by Bruce Larson) As you probably guessed, this quote is from an earlier era and, in fact, was written in 1981. I think we would all agree it rings true for today for it seems that everyone is asking..... *“what’s in it for me?”*

But entitlement isn’t a recent phenomenon. As long as humans have walked the earth, the attitude of entitlement has been front and center. Jesus confronted entitlement among the Pharisees with a powerful parable which was introduced with these words, **“You cannot serve God and wealth.”** **“The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed him.”** (16:13-14) The Pharisees felt entitled because they believed that money was a sign that they were blessed by God, and poverty was the result of God’s curse. And some still believe that to this day! But Jesus rattles their theological cages by telling the parable of *The Rich Man and Lazarus*. Luke 16:19-31

¹⁹“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. ²²The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.’ ²⁵But Abraham said, ‘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. ²⁶Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.' ²⁷He said, 'Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house— ²⁸for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.' ²⁹Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.' ³⁰He said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' ³¹He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'" ***The Word of the Lord...***

This parable can change your life! It did for Dr. Albert Schweitzer whose name many of you remember. Albert Schweitzer, born in Germany, was enormously gifted having advanced degrees in music, medicine and theology. As the story goes he was in worship one Sunday and heard a sermon preached on the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. As he pondered the meaning of this parable he came to the conclusion that the rich man stood for wealthy and powerful Europe and Lazarus for poor Africa. The question, "*What will you do for Lazarus?*" kept playing in his mind and he answered that question by sailing, in 1913, to central Africa (now Gabon) where he built Lambarene Hospital. He served the African people as physician for the rest of his life. While Albert Schweitzer's story is inspirational the real question for us today is "*what will we do for Lazarus?*" Let's take a closer look at this parable.

First of all this is not a parable about heaven and hell. Remember parables are stories with one basic point and the point of this parable is not to establish the reality of heaven or hell. Secondly, this is not a parable to condemn the rich and commend the poor. By reading the first two lines we see that it wasn't because the rich man was rich that he was condemned. ¹⁹***There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day.*** ²⁰***And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores,*** ²¹***who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores.*** Quite a contrast: one feasted sumptuously every day....the other longed to satisfy his hunger with the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table.

The three words that catch my attention are, “*at his gate.*” The only ones that paid attention to Lazarus were the dogs that came and licked his sores. The rich man was blind to Lazarus.....maybe, as he walked through his gate each day, he reminded himself not to make eye contact. Maybe the rich man was so caught up in his toys, parties, family, church, business, investments and wine cellar that it never occurred to him to ask the question, “*What will I do for Lazarus?*” Or if he did ask himself the question he might have quickly dismissed it with “*oh well, you know what they say, the poor will always be with us....that’s just the way it is,*” or “*he’s just a bum, probably deserves being on the street. I’ve worked hard for what I’ve earned and I deserve my privacy.*” The truth of this parable is that the rich man was damned for his indifference to the man right at *his gate*. He was not condemned for what he did but for doing nothing.

We learn at the end of this parable that the rich man has five brothers who evidently are just as uncaring as he was and the rich man begs Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers, lest they end up in the same place of torment. But Abraham reminds him that they have Moses and the prophets and they should listen to them. But the rich man argues that they won’t repent unless something dramatic happens like Lazarus coming back from the dead to warn them. Abraham tells the rich man that even that won’t help....end of parable.

This is the scary part of this parable for the brothers, as do we, still had choice. They could listen to Moses and the prophets who consistently advocated for the Lazaruses of the world or they could, like their big brother, be indifferent to Lazarus. We also have Moses and the prophets and we are particularly blessed to have the Living Christ who has promised to be with us always, as our stain glass window reminds us each week. But Jesus not only comes to us with comfort, peace and strength he comes to us with an uncompromising call to minister to Lazarus, “*....I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.....just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.*” (Matthew 25:35-36, 40) Jesus asks, “*What will you do for Lazarus?*”

While we would all say that we want to serve “*the least of these*” and we certainly don’t want to step over the Lazaruses in our lives we first have to identify them. Albert Schweitzer identified a whole continent and gave his life in service to the people of Africa. I have found, however, that it is not always easy to determine who Lazarus is in my life and ministry.

I remember an incident while I was serving First Pres in Grand Island, Nebraska. A fellow came in and gave me his story that he and his wife were driving back home to Alaska but they had run out of money, gas and food. Would I help them? He showed me his Alaska driver’s license and his Alaska commercial fishing license. We talked for some time and I was finally convinced of his need. Oh, did I tell you that he promised to send me a case of frozen salmon once he got back to Alaska? Well, I had to intrude on a Deacon’s time to come and sign a check for \$100 which I gave to my Alaskan fisherman friend. Needless to say I never heard from the fellow and I never got the promised salmon. I learned a lot about myself from that experience: I have always had a heart for hurting people and I sincerely wanted to help this man and his wife, however, I am gullible and easily conned and, yes, I was looking forward to the gift of salmon. Helping Lazarus isn’t always as easy and straight forward as it might seem. We are a complex mix of generosity/stinginess...emotion/reason...how can I help/what’s in it for me...faith/doubt...openness/self-preservation and we live with a lot of gray. Few situations are as “black and white” as the rich man and Lazarus. It’s not always easy to discern how to help Lazarus!

Nevertheless, the question needs to be ever before us, “*What will we do for Lazarus?*” I am pleased that our church recognized the need of 46% of grade school children in our Kettering schools who need free or reduced cost lunches. You will recall that we featured the Kettering Backpack ministry as our August 29th Fifth Sunday offering. You gave well over one thousand dollars to provide these children with nutritional food. Listen to what a fifth grade recipient of the Backpack ministry said, “*If it were up to me, I would continue this program because it helps people that don’t have much food so they won’t go hungry*”. Sounds like Lazarus speaking! *Dave Youngerman*, tells me that people are needed to help put the backpack items together. If you would like to help with the Backpack Ministry please contact Dave Youngerman. What a special way for Fairmont to help the children of Kettering.

Sometimes Lazarus doesn't look like the Lazarus of the parable. I think of those who are living in well kept homes and yet, even as they put on a happy face, they are suffocating under the weight of debt, unemployment, insurmountable medical bills, wayward children, senior citizens unable to care for themselves and not sure where to turn for help....there are a lot of hurting people right here in beautiful suburban Dayton, Ohio. But we don't like to admit that we all need some kind of help sometime. The truth is....it can be a gift to allow others to help you. How can we come alongside one another and our neighbors with support that leaves dignity in tack and is genuinely helpful?

Since this parable was prompted as a lesson to the Pharisees who were "**lovers of money**" let me conclude with a few comments about money. We have seen that the rich man was judged, not for being wealthy, but for refusing to use his wealth and resources to help Lazarus. No matter whether we consider ourselves wealthy or poor or somewhere in between, the question is not *how much money we have* but what will *we* do for Lazarus with *what we have*? How liberating it is to view our money and resources as gifts from God, not only for our use, but also to be shared with others.

You have probably heard it said that, "money is the root of all evil." But Paul sets the record straight when he writes Timothy, "***For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith....***" (I Timothy 6:10) In our culture and in these times we are continuously encouraged to fixate on money as if money was our life and salvation. Get rich quick schemes abound. Messages that we are entitled to be rich abound. Warnings that we don't have enough money abound. Money is important, don't get me wrong, but living for money will not be a life well lived....from God's point of view. Evidently some wandered away from faith because of their love for money back in Paul's day even as they do today.

The rich man showed no concern for Lazarus because he was possessed by his possessions and money. Someone once said that money is the largest slaveholder in the world. That's why we need to continually be reminded of Paul's instruction to Timothy, "***we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these.***" (I Timothy 6:7, 8) Contentment! *When was the last time you felt soul satisfying contentment?*

*The story is told that *Joseph Heller*, author of the book Catch-22, was attending the party of a billionaire and someone came up to him and pointed out that the party's host made more money in a single day of hedge fund trading than Heller had ever earned from his book. Heller replied: "***Yes, but I have something he will never have.*** His friend asked him what that might be and Heller simply replied, "***enough.***"

Amen

*(In an article from the "The Christian Century" magazine; September 21, 2010, p. 20.)

The following prayer was given by Rev. Denise Ingram:

Holy, merciful, forgiving God,

We give thanks you meet us here as we gather to worship you. We give thanks you meet us wherever we are. We are thankful you are present no matter what we face in life, steadfast in love and mercy, ever patient as we strive to more fully follow you.

We acknowledge, O God, we hear this parable and resonant with Lazarus -- wishing we could receive more compassion and be relieved of pain in this life. We have experienced pain in our lives. We also aspire to be wealthy. We desire more than we have even when more would be too much. Scripture tells us to trust in you rather than riches but we experience our anxiety lowering when our bank accounts and retirement funds are plentiful.

Merciful God, convict us. Show us how life-denying it is to set our hopes on riches. Teach us to set our lives on you, fully resting in your care

and the ways you so richly provide for us. Enable us to become rich in compassion and generous with our actions. We are your servants, your workers – direct our labor. Show us how to close the chasm that cuts any one of us from the rest of us that all of us might take hold of the life that is life indeed--the life you will for all your children. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.