

Sermon by The Rev. Bollin M. Millner, Jr
Grace and Holy Trinity Church
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Luke 16:19-31

Jesus said, "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He 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.' But 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. Besides 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.' He said, 'Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house-- for I have five brothers-- that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.' Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.' He said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' He 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.'"

Holy Scripture is a great treasure. In the Episcopal Church, even if we as individuals don't spend as much time with it as we could, we do drench our corporate worship in it. ... with the Old Testament lesson, psalm, New Testament lesson and Gospel.

I love Scripture. Its call to me is why I do what I do. In my life as a clergy person, I am meant to spend quality time with it which I am happy to do. Scripture grabbed me in high school and it has never let go.

Now, I remember, when I was at Duke University Divinity School having a conversation with a completely unchurched undergraduate. He was truly surprised that one could study Scripture for years, even earn a PhD in it. He was shocked and said, "I mean, it is fixed. Hasn't everything that could be said about it been said?"

I hardly knew where to start. But you and I know that Scripture is a living thing. The Spirit speaks to us through it. Scripture generates an encounter with God. And you see, Scripture is not a static set of words- of data that can be mastered. Scripture is a relationship, a living relationship.

There is, of course, an over-arching narrative that we do well to keep in mind...that golden thread¹ which weaves its way through the books. That narrative notes that God lovingly created this world, and even more lovingly redeemed it through Israel and through the perfect child of Israel Jesus. The great story says that in the Anointed Jesus, all people are adopted as daughters and sons. And this means everyone can take part in God's renewal of this world, a renewal from which not even death can separate us.

But we don't receive Scripture passively, it is not something to be mastered by rote...we enter into the Scriptural narrative...because even though we know in faith where it is going and we live in hope...the story is on-going.

¹ I picked up the phrase "Golden Thread" from Verna Dozier.

So there is in Scripture this over-arching narrative and there is much else besides. It is, quite frankly, a challenging world. It is not a world of easy answers regardless of what anyone might try to tell you.

A recent favorite passage of mine comes from the Book of Proverbs. 26:4 says: “Do not answer a dullard in accord with his folly, else you will become like him.” Then 26:5 says: “Answer a dullard in accord with his folly, else he will think himself wise.”² The Word of the Lord!

We can also see the challenge of Scripture in the Gospel lesson for today where we heard the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. This was a well-known folk tale in the ancient near east. The original tale seems to have run that there was this rich man, at his gate was this poor man. At death the poor man was comforted and received good things while the rich man was tormented. The point being that there will be a day of reckoning. The poor will be raised up. And the moral of the story—we should do the right thing for the poor.

Let me note some things about this ancient tale. First off, the Rich Man is not malevolent. He is not actively persecuting Lazarus. It is just that he is lucky, has a place of privilege, has wealth...and he just doesn't see...or chooses not to see that society is not treating everyone the same way. He is completely involved with his own life and his own enjoyment. But with his resources the Rich Man could have seen, and could have made a difference.

Please also note that in the parable, there is no gloating, no celebration of the Rich Man's fate. In fact, there is a sadness. Abraham, affectionately addresses the man, “Child.”

Now...before I go on to talk about some additions that Jesus in Luke's gospel has made to this traditional parable, let me pause to ask a question, which is on your mind I suspect.

The question is: “Who are the Lazaruses in our world? Who don't we see or don't want

to see?” I suppose an obvious answer to that, is to equate the panhandlers, which are all around Richmond these days, with Lazarus. Are they Lazarus?

They could be, certainly. But truly seeing them involves a lot more than just passing along some spare change to ease our conscience...spare change doesn't change the reality...nor the likelihood that the money collected will be used for alcohol and drugs. Just last week a friend of mine was at a gas station on Parham and these folks had a sign, “Need gas.” So my friend said, “Pull over here and I'll put some gas in your car.” My friend was turned down. The reply: “We just need cash.” This same friend carries around protein bars, so whenever anyone asks for money for food, she can offer them something to eat. Not a bad way to do business.

But truly seeing means being involved far beyond a hand out of any kind. Truly seeing means a hand up not a hand out. It means having a soup kitchen to provide a wholesome meal with a healthy dose of hospitality. It means working with CARITAS, Congregations Around Richmond Involved to Assure Shelter, to get people off the streets, if only at night. It means supporting programs like “Homeward” which try not to enable homelessness but to move people toward stability. Truly seeing means that we hold our political systems accountable for mental health services and drug and alcohol rehabilitation services.

The church has been wrestling with this from the beginning - How to be compassionate and also how to draw out the best in people rather than encourage unhealthy dependency. So for instance, in the third chapter of 2 Thessalonians Paul has to deal with people who are idle. “But we command you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from any brother who lives an undisciplined (unruly or idle) life...If anyone is not willing to work, neither should he eat...but if anyone does not obey our message...take note of him and do not associate with him, so that he may

² Jewish Publication Society translation.

be ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.”³

Or yet again, in First Timothy Paul had to deal with a church with too many widows on the dole. They wanted to support women who had no one, but there were some problems. Other family members should have been doing their duty and not burdening the church. So Paul mentions that and then says, okay...If a widow is truly on her own, help her. But no widow should be put on the list unless she is at least sixty years old...and has a reputation for good works.” See chapter five for the full story.

But can you see, the church struggling to do the right thing but truly engaging people? Truly seeing.

Okay, so that is the traditional folk tale. What Jesus in Luke adds to it is the bit at the end, which for Jesus presumably is the main point. “The rich man asks that Lazarus be allowed to convey a special warning to his five brothers who are still alive. The answer is that they have the word of Scripture and that is sufficient. Those who are unmoved by the message of Scripture will not be convinced by a miracle either, even by a resurrection.”⁴

Which brings us back to where we started. And that is the good news for today. We do not need spectacular displays. Scripture meets us right where we are, in the day to day. Thanks be to God for the Holy Scripture, which contains all things necessary for salvation. Let it be our duty and joy to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest it. How blessed we are to have the Word of God...with the greatest story ever told, full of promise, faith, hope, wisdom and challenge. Amen.

³ See chapter three. New English Translation.

⁴ “Preaching the Lectionary” by Fuller and Westberg, third edition, page 501.