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College Hill Presbyterian Church - Tulsa, Oklahoma
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Texts: I Timothy 6:6-19, Luke 16:19-31

Haughty and Unconvinced

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. 22 The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham.[a] The rich man also died and was buried. 23 In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side.[b] 24 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.’ 25 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. 26 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.’ 27 He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house— 28 for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ 29 Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ 30 He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ 31 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.’”

Footnotes:

Luke 16:22 Gk to Abraham’s bosom

Luke 16:23 Gk in his bosom

It is helpful to understand the parables of Jesus within the context they were delivered. Here, in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is on the road. Luke has followed the beginning of Jesus' ministry after the death of John the Baptist, through his call to those who would follow him to leave all they have; and when we happen upon him here, in chapter sixteen, Jesus is telling his followers through a series of parables (stories) what he values and what is required to follow him, even while they experience the act of walking beside him toward Jerusalem. By this point in his ministry, Jesus is accompanied not just by his disciples (the twelve) but by powerful and poor alike, from scribes, Pharisees, lawyers and tax collectors, to laborers and outcasts (Luke 14:25; 15:1,3,8,11; 16:1, 14).

The Lukan Jesus is a radical prophet subverting the paradigms of wealth, power, and value. In the preceding chapters, Jesus has instructed people not to take the seats of privilege at feasts (Luke 14:7); they should invite the poor, the unlovely, and marginalized to their lavish banquets rather than their elite friends and family and folks who can return the invitation (14:21-24); they should consider selling all their possessions and redistribute the proceeds to the poor (18:18-25); be commended for giving extravagantly to the poor and making restitution to those they defrauded (19:1-10); Lukan Jesus shames the rich who contribute gifts to the Temple from their excess, even while a poor widow who gives her meager alms is noted to have sacrificed much (21:1-4).

Our rich man and Lazarus sit right in line with the teaching of Jesus, this shifting of paradigms and fortunes, images and examples for his followers that Jesus values the poor, the sick, and the marginalized. There is good precedent to note that Jesus was likely addressing these conversations about wealth and poverty to the learned and educated that were following him, that Jesus was teaching to raise the consciousness of the comfortable about poverty, compassion, and social inequality. But I also think it is more than that. I think there is possibility in our account for all of us to be made thoughtful about how we see and live here and now.

Hear this again: A rich man, well-dressed, well-fed, spent his days walking past Lazarus, a man destitute and starving and sheltering in the shadow of the man's home. A gate separated them, a gate the man presumably had to walk through consistently in order to be about his business. A gate that maybe didn't completely hide the sick and desperate Lazarus whose great desire was to subsist on the scraps that were cast off from the man who regularly passed by him.

We don't know why Lazarus was poor, how he ended up living where he was, what systems he participated in, what effort he had gone to to reverse his situation, what activities he had or hadn't participated in to land him where he was. Similarly, we don't know why the rich man was rich, how he ended up well-fed, dressed in beautiful clothes, and comfortable. We don't know if his wealth was inherited, or earned, or even honest. He doesn't even get a name, in fact, Lazarus (El-Azar, God has helped) is the only figure in the litany of stories I mentioned from this Lukan line-up that does receive a name. Perhaps naming him reminds us that the poor are seen, they are dignified, they do matter, Lazarus is named whereas the rich man, he could be anyone, he could be any of us.

In studying this text, I noted that many of the commentaries on this passage focus on mechanics, what is Abraham's bosom, what is Hades, and the afterlife, what are the law and the prophets and the significance they would hold in the original hearers experience? These are all great rich questions, textual variances are fascinating and informative and you are welcome to go read the commentaries to satisfy these answers, but I think it is so easy to read this story and dissect it and avoid seeing the obvious, avoid confronting what is right in front of us.

This is a dark story. Unpleasant and unresolved. One that when we come right up against it, (and I'm speaking from experience here) we might rather avert our eyes, make it a polemic

against wealth or an explanation of the afterlife, but that misses the urgency of this account. Jesus is not trying to make friends, or offer consolation, I don't even think he's trying to scare people with the possibility of hellfire, he is concerned for these people's formation. He is concerned for their hearts and their imaginations and the real implications of how that changes the way they live.

This story is about what is at stake, and what is at stake is our very lives. It seems harsh to us in that we know the ending and we still refuse to change how we live. The rich become richer, while the poor become poorer. Time moves quickly, humans exist, have experiences in the world, and then die. No one has all the time, don't wait until tomorrow to make decisions about how you're going to live, because you're deciding that with your actions today. What we ascribe worth to today, the place we invest our time, and our energy, and our imagination, that becomes the reality of our witness. To whom or to what do we witness?

I think it is helpful to note that although this parable has wealth as a central component, as so much of Luke does, but I don't think this is just about wealth. We just heard in our Timothy reading that the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and it is something that draws us away from our faith. Not *THE* root of all evil, and money and wealth are not themselves evil, but that when our hearts become consumed with the pursuit of them, when we long for them, put them above our concern for human dignity, for the care of creation, we miss the whole work to which we have been called. We become haughty. That which we are commanded and know to be important to the heart of God, we pass by, we become absorbed in our desire for gratification now, we limit the imagination of our hearts and minds with the temporary comfort of our bodies.

What all these parables in Luke, with their concern for the poor and the marginalized, with their warning about the love of power and wealth, and our text in Timothy, what they ask is a difference in how we live. Not simply a rejection of wealth, or an obligatory volunteerism for "a good cause," no, they ask us to see the world around us, to really see it, not as the world sees it, but as Christ sees it. We are not invited to an existence of moral apathy and indifference, but to an experience of life where each person has value, and dignity, where human suffering, human dignity, and human worth—are real. [1]

My son has a deep love of Tolkien—and make no mistake, he's four, that is not a spontaneous love but more of an apple/tree/formation reality) and has been listening to the Fellowship of the Ring which reminded me of something recently: there is this moment in the story when Gandalf and the fellowship are in the great hall in the mines of Moria, they are running madly toward their only hope of escape, and in the midst of enduring the goblins and ominous drumming, the challenges and death that are almost certain, there is a sort of visceral moment of defeat. Legolas looks behind him in horror and literally drops his weapon, Gimli covers his eyes in despair, and Gandalf nearly collapses in defeat with the appearance of the demon Balrog. This grim and horrifying monster from the depth, more flame and shadow than substance, it is coming for them...their hearts literally quail as they see and recognize it, and for a brief moment

in their fight for survival they are almost defeated by the near seeing of evil. [3] It is powerful, and I think it speaks to so much of our response to hard things in the world today.

I don't know when confronting hard things became so hard, when acknowledging sin, and brokenness, and our participation in them became a partisan issue. I'm talking about the fact that many of us have a Balrog level reaction to being asked to examine our role in white supremacy, or the abuse of our planet, or the care of the poor, or the systems of power and control that we support in order to protect our own meager slice of the pie. I'm talking about fake news and believing what we want to believe, about an unwillingness to ask where things come from because we don't want to know who was harmed so we could have plenty, I'm talking about believing the worst about people because of their "agenda" or history, or they way they live differently in the world than I chose to live.

Haughty and unconvinced. IF we don't look, if we don't change, maybe we won't bear the consequences. Who knows, maybe Lazarus stayed because the rich man tossed him a few coins now and again, maybe this man had a habit of dropping his doggie-bag off in ways that just sustained Lazarus' fragile existence, maybe this man wrestled with the implications of giving money to beggars (like I do) who would just use it for drugs or alcohol, or maybe in the comfort of his lovely home maybe this rich man had difficult conversations with his educated friends about "the problem of the poor" and the organizations they could donate to in order to prevent it from being their problem.

What makes me so deeply uncomfortable about this story is that we don't know any of that information, but what we do know is that even in death, the behavior the entitlement, the inability to see things continues for the rich man. Being in torment doesn't suddenly cause him to change his behavior, doesn't prompt him to change his posture toward Lazarus, or acknowledge his role in this whole narrative. He knows Lazarus' name, the man knew of his existence. He tells Abraham to send Lazarus to him, to serve him and comfort him in his distress. He continues to believe the narrative that other people are there to serve his exceptional need, that he should receive the help he was never willing to offer. Lazarus is a prop to this man, he doesn't even address him and dignify him with the request (the one he presumably knows from years of living in proximity) just tells Abraham to make him do his bidding. And it's not bad bidding right? He's concerned for his family, for his loved ones. Don't let this happen to them, at least send them a warning so they can be aware of what is coming.

They know what is coming. They have the witness, Moses, the prophets, they know that God has instructed them to perform justice for orphans and widows, love strangers by providing food and clothing; to do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with God (Deuteronomy 10:19; Micah 6:8).

The grandiose moments, the miracles and mountain tops, the blessing and wealth and power and authority, the things that we love and prize about our faith, many good things, they get inside of us and what we believe about ourselves and the world. They distract us from seeing as

Jesus calls us to see. They let us shift our focus away from the kinship of our human condition to the individualism and import of my own story.

I grew up with a very subversive theology of blessing, a form of prosperity gospel that told the lie that the Lazarus at our gate was there because he was lazy, because he didn't try hard enough. I was taught that I had good things here and now because I was blessed by God, because I did the right things, and God favored me because I was obedient and worked hard. NO one challenged me to examine the structures that allowed me to have the things I wanted with relative ease, that placed me in a narrative of being a "safe" and "valued" member of a community. That allowed me to cringe from sisters and brothers experiencing homelessness, and issues of systemic oppression. Even today, I find myself convicted about these areas I so often point to...but I have worked so hard, I haven't had it easy, I deserve what I have...I, I, I.

We aren't the heroes. In our western ideology we have allowed ourselves to be told that our story matters the most. But this story, the Gospel, it challenges that, it asks us to put aside our sense of worthiness and importance and to look. To stop passing by the unlovely, the inconvenient, the reality of who we are and that in which we willingly participate. It is so hard. To see and recognize in the wounded and bleeding bodies of our sisters and brothers, in the brokenness and depletion of our world, to see my own participation, to wrestle with the implications of my actions and to be accountable fully in the stories of other people's hunger, illness, terror, and shame. And not just to do this personally, but then to walk into the world and hold our families, and friends, and governance, and culture accountable.

This is what is at stake, we know the stories, but do we believe, do we see what is and what will be. Because frankly, it doesn't matter how much I stand up and declare an uncomfortable word if I leave here this morning, with my imagination about what God is calling me to still impoverished, still limited by my own self-focus and self-gratification, I will forever be on the wrong side of that chasm—a chasm that cannot be crossed by me.

If you are feeling a little clobbered, I have a place for you to start, to ask for help with seeing the world around you as Jesus sees it, a way forward. I invite you, as you wake in the morning this week, to ask God to unlock the limits of your vision and your imagination for the world around you. It can be a simple prayer. Just a few seconds really. Because, what is happening in our country, what is happening to the earth with our pollution and consumption of resources, what is happening in our world with violence, and war, and systemic poverty, it can be so much to see, and so much to look at, to do so, we need help. We need help with the superficiality of conversations about "problems," we need conviction for our false piety, we need courage to walk into and humbly engage the implications of all that we participate in...our privilege, our complicitness, our refusal to take hold of the life that really is life. (1 Tim. 6:19).

We can't cross that chasm, that divide we have built of refusing to see, refusing to care, of being unconvinced of anything but our own need...but there is one who has and who continues to cross that chasm. The one who brings down walls and dividing lines, who sacrifices and serves

and sees. The one who shows us the way forward. The one who invites us to a life where we are richly provided with everything for our enjoyment. Don't look away, don't be haughty, all our very ordinary very human moments are at stake.

It so easy to remain unconvinced, after all, these are just stories, right? Hard stories, uncomfortable, dangerous even in what they ask us to do, in the *everything* that they require from us. But, we have the stories, we have the witness, and we can choose how to respond. I do not believe that our stories were written to end in tragedy, as this one does, our story as followers of Christ is one of redemption that has been offered, of hope, of reunion, of new life. In the language of this week's epistle, by sharing generously and being rich in good deeds, we "lay up treasure for ourselves as a firm foundation for the coming age," and "take hold of the life that is truly life." Will you?

Endnotes:

- 1]. Gratitude to the Preaching the RCL group of Young Clergy Women International for inspiration on the "looking and seeing" themes.
- 2]. Texts read for reference: Luke (Sacra Pagina) by Luke Timothy Johnson, Luke (New Testament Library) by John T. Carroll, Luke (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture) edited by Arthur Just Jr., Journey with Jesus by Debbie Thomas, and The Working Preacher resource from the ELCA.
- 3]. Tolkien, J.R.R., *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Book 2, Chapter 5, The Bridge of Khazad-dûm.