Compassion Matters

Sixteen Sunday after Pentecost 2019

Luke 16:19-31

*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.’*

 *Luke 16:26*

 As a pastor for fifty something years, I have been approached on many occasions by persons seeking help, usually in the form of money. We see them all the time, at stop lights with signs, sitting on street corners with a container of some sort into which they would have us make a deposit. Most of the time, if we’re honest, we pass them by. We have our reasons. On other occasions, we may be moved to drop a dollar or loose change into their coffers. We rarely make eye contact.

 On one occasion, I remember sitting in the pastor’s study at the church at which I was doing an interim. A reasonably clean and well-dressed man came into my office. He, like most of the ones who approach me for a handout, had a hard luck story. He worked as a computer programmer, he shared, and lost his job. He had begun working as a temp at another place, but would not be paid for two weeks. He just needed something to tie him over till then and then he would pay the church back. I have heard all the scams and had grown jaded and skeptical over the years. Can’t do it, I responded, the church has no funds to help. But he was smooth and sounded sincere. If he could just have a few dollars, he would meet me at a coffee shop around the corner on Friday and pay me back after he got his paycheck. I thought I would take a chance and reached into my wallet and gave him some cash. Of course, you know what happened. I went to the coffee shop, waited an hour, and realized I had been had. Once more.

 I have heard all the stories and should have known. People make a living scamming churches and other people of good will who want to help people in need. And people have been taken for more money than they can afford by these manipulative ones, especially the elderly.

 So when Jesus shares this parable about a beggar, it automatically triggers a negative response in many of us. A red flag goes up, and we automatically get our hackles up.

* *He’s just going to spend the money on booze or drugs.*
* *Why doesn’t he work to support himself, like all us hard working people?*
* *If I give him money, it will just encourage him to remain a beggar.*

Jesus doesn’t tell us much in the parable about Lazarus the beggar, just that he was “covered with sores” [v.20], that he “longed to eat the crumbs that fell from the rich man’s table,” [v.21] and “dogs would come and lick his sores.” [v.21] How gross.

Many of us – and I am as guilty as the next person – tend to place people in these categories. We call them “the poor,” as if all poor people are the same, and have the same stories. He has a name, Jesus seems to tell us, and his name is Lazarus. He is not some nameless, anonymous one in a sea of others. Given a name, Lazarus is imbued with worth in the eyes of our Lord.

The rich man, on the other hand, strangely is not given a name by Jesus. In the Vulgate, the Latin translation of the Bible, the rich man is given the name *Dives*, which in Latin literally means *rich man.* Because Jesus intentionally does not give him a name, I believe he intends to let him represent rich people in his day. This is how rich people treat the poor and outcast, he means to say. This uber rich guy, Jesus tells us, dressed in the latest Armani suits, accompanied by the best Italian shoes money can buy. He eats the best food cooked by his personal chef, or if he chooses, goes out to Alan Wong’s or Morimoto’s for dinner. Because he lives in a mansion straight out of Architectural Digest, Lazarus’ friends drop the beggar off in front his driveway, with the hope that uber-rich guy will drop a few shekels into his coffers. But Lazarus is invisible to uber-rich guy and has to hope that he can beat the dogs to the garbage bins to eat the food thrown out by the household. It is the privilege of wealth that we do not have to see the poor. This is why we don’t want the homeless in our neighborhood. Not in my back yard.

Jesus wants to show us the huge ravine that separates the rich and the poor in his day. Things have not changed over the centuries. Today we commonly confess the growing chasm between the rich and the poor, the disappearing middle class. We talk about the one percent who possess the lion’s share of the nation’s and world’s wealth, and watch as the gulf between them and us grows increasingly wider, rendering most of us in this room closer to poverty than the upper class.

Then the inevitable happens: they both die. One of the constant messages of Jesus is that wealth will not protect you from your mortality. We will all die. No one gets out of this world alive. Jesus has just told the story of another rich person who is becoming richer and richer, and instead of sharing his largesse or even spending down what he has, continues to build his investment portfolio, adding even more to his grotesque wealth. Jesus calls him a fool, and he dies suddenly, leaving nothing but a legacy of unspent wealth.

The same thing happens in this parable. The rich man and Lazarus both die. That’s when the great reversal happens. In death, the chasm between Lazarus and Dives still remains just as great as ever, except that, in the world to come, the roles are reversed: the rich are in torment, just as the poor are in this life; and Lazarus, the prototype of the poor on this side of death, rests in idyllic bliss on the bosom of Abraham.

This is one of the central messages of the gospel writer Luke: in the world in which God reigns, the world is turned upside down. Do you remember Mary’s song, Mary the mother of Jesus? In the opening chapter of Luke’s gospel, she sings what we know today as the Magnificat:

*[God] has pulled the powerful down from their thrones and lifted up the lowly.*

*He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty-handed.*

 Luke 1:52-53

I don’t believe Jesus believed there is an inherent evil in money or wealth. It’s just what wealth can do to a person. It can make one want more and more of it, never satiating the real hunger deep down inside. It can get to the point where you no longer possess wealth; it possesses you. You guard it with all you’re worth. You build bigger barns so you can store more of it. All the while, it never satisfies.

Moreover, it dulls your sensitivity to the needs of others. It becomes easier and easier to look the other way, to pass by on the other side, cross the street when you encounter someone in need. It’s easy to look down on them, to monku monku when they build encampments on your favorite beach. I am just as guilty as the next person. I certainly cannot sit in judgment.

But Jesus can and does. Compassion matters, and that’s the root of it all. True compassion does not equate to pity. Pity moves us to say, *oh, poor man, he’s down on his luck,* as we move on to our own business. Or, *poor woman, all those little ones,* and we get on to our next item on our to-do list. Compassion moves us to see that person in need, not as poor so-and-so, but as neighbor, not as “the poor,” but as my sister or brother, part of the ohana of God. Just as we say, *she’s family, and family takes care of each other*, what would it say to others if we regarded all people family, and say, family takes care of each other? Jesus seems to be telling us, our very soul and destiny depends on how we answer that question.

Lazarus lives all around us. Do we have eyes to see him? Or do we render him invisible? Your soul depends on how you answer.