

“Loving Lazarus”
 Rev. Eric. S. Corbin
 First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
 September 25, 2016

[Luke 16:19-31](#)

Several years ago, renowned author and speaker Tony Campolo was having dinner in a restaurant in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Now, this was years before the devastating earthquake in Haiti, but Haiti has long been a very poor country, in fact the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. Campolo was seated comfortably at a table next to the front window of the restaurant, ready to begin enjoying his meal, when he realized he was being watched. He says:

With their noses pressed flat against the glass, three raggedy, dirty Haitian boys stared at the food on my plate. Their hair was rust-colored because of a lack of protein and they had the distended stomachs that give evidence of extreme malnutrition. Their eyes, riveted on my food, were disturbing. To say the least. The waiter, recognizing how upset I was, moved quickly to pull down the window shade. “Don’t let them bother you! Enjoy your meal!” he said. As if I could.¹

I wonder if I could. Could you? The rich man in the parable that Jesus told today certainly could. Jesus paints a vivid picture of these two men. The first man is said to be wealthy, and his choices are designed to show off that wealth. He wears fine linen undergarments and his outerwear is purple – a color that exudes wealth, as it was the most expensive dye there was. Only the super-rich could afford purple clothing. This might be the equivalent today of someone wearing a different Brooks Brothers suit every day of the week. Next, Jesus tells us that he “feasted sumptuously every day.” Do you know anyone who “feasts” *every day*? This guy not only feasts every day, he “feasts sumptuously” every day – or as one commentator puts this phrase, “celebrated with ostentation.” This guy does what he does to show off. Even the “gate” that Jesus tells us about is no ordinary gate. The word Jesus used meant a large and fancy gate that one

¹ *Red Letter Christians*, page 8

would see outside of a palace. The “rich man” in this parable isn’t just “comfortable,” he is super-rich.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is the poor man, Lazarus. There’s actually something a bit different here because this is the only character in any of Jesus’ parables who is given a name. The rich man, you may have heard called *Dives*, wasn’t actually named in the parable. *Dives* is the Latin for rich – it isn’t the man’s name. But Lazarus *is* named, and this gives us a glimpse of who is important in this story. Now, Lazarus is not just poor; he is destitute and homeless. He appears to be lame, as all he can do is lay at the gate of the rich man’s home. Perhaps as a result of his inability to move, he is covered with open wounds that attract stray dogs which come and lick his sores. The picture that Jesus paints is not one that we really want to see. If you actually picture this in your mind’s eye, you might just gag a bit. Lazarus manages to survive on scraps that people bring him, but apparently nothing from the rich man, as Jesus tells us that Lazarus “*longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table.*”

What a setup to the story – and that is actually just the first two sentences. It is a not-so-subtle setup. One could hardly imagine a wealthier man than this nameless rich man or a poorer man than Lazarus. Massive wealth inequality is not new with our culture. Jesus’ audience would have heard about these two men and thought that the rich man obviously had the favor of God and the poor man obviously had been cursed by God. Perhaps today we understand that it’s not quite so simple. Do blessings come from God? Indeed, they do. Does that mean that the richest people are the ones most loved by God and the poorest people are unloved by God? Absolutely not. In fact, in the next two verses of this parable, we discover that Lazarus dies and goes to heaven, while the rich man dies and is sent to Hades. Now, before we go further, I’d like to caution that we *not* use what comes next as a literal description of the afterlife in either heaven or hell. As the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr said, it is pointless to speculate on the “furniture of heaven and the temperature of hell.” This is a parable. Jesus is telling a story to make a point about *this* life, not

giving a detailed account of the afterlife. In this parable, however, the rich man can see to where Lazarus is and he sees the comfort of Lazarus contrasted with the agony he is experiencing. At this point, we learn a couple more things. First, we learn that the rich man actually recognizes Lazarus and calls him by name. Perhaps earlier we thought that maybe he hasn't even *seen* Lazarus at the gate of his palace. Maybe he doesn't even know about the plight of Lazarus, but we see that he recognizes him and knows his name. This was not just a sin of failing to see what was around him. He saw Lazarus and still did nothing to help him. The second thing we find is that he hasn't learned much of a lesson yet for he asks Abraham to have Lazarus to do his bidding. He thinks that Lazarus should leave the comforts he is experiencing and come to put a drop of water on his tongue to cool him down. Though the rich man is in agony and Lazarus is comforted by Father Abraham, the rich man still seems himself as superior to Lazarus and wants to boss Lazarus around. This man doesn't learn lessons easily!

Next, the rich man asks for something that sounds a lot like Dickens' *Christmas Carol*. Abraham, send this dead man to the home of my brothers so that they may be warned about the consequences of the behavior and not also be tormented as I am. This worked out well in the case of Scrooge, but Abraham denies this request, saying that the brothers have the words of Moses and the prophets to guide them in what they should do. The rich man knows his brothers well – they are probably just like him – and he knows they won't heed the words of the scripture, but just maybe they'll listen to a man who is risen from the dead. Abraham says that if the words of Moses and the prophets won't convince them, then neither will someone raised from the dead. In other words, they've had plenty opportunity to know better all along. No one with access to a Bible can claim ignorance of the calls for just treatment of the poor. Abraham tells him that if the living words of scripture won't do it for this man's brothers, then a dead man returned to life won't convince them, either.

And Abraham is right. *We* have someone raised from the dead. We have the words of scripture. We have all of that, and still if we compare ourselves to those outrageous caricatures – the wealthiest one possible and the poorest one possible – most of us will find ourselves much closer to the wealthy man than to homeless, destitute Lazarus. Throughout the Bible, we see time and time again how God loves the poor and how we are to treat them, and the challenge of using wealth well.

A man went to visit in a home where there were several children, and, trying to relate to the kids, he asked one of the girls about her doll collection. “Which is your favorite doll?” he asked. “Promise not to laugh if I tell you?” she questioned. He promised not to laugh, and the little girl got up, went into another room, and brought back a worn-out, tattered doll that looked like a refugee from the trash pile. There was a crack in the arm, a missing nose, marks all over the body and a bald head. The man did not laugh, but unable to hide his surprise, he asked, “Why do you love this one the most?” She replied, “Because she needs it most. If I didn’t love her, nobody would.”

God is in the lives of those who cry out to us for our love and compassion. We can choose, like the rich man, to ignore them, but we cannot do so and claim that we are doing the work of our God. When Abraham mentioned Moses and the prophets, here is just a little bit of what he was referring to:

In Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Ruth, 1 Samuel, Esther, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Amos, Micah, Zechariah, and Malachi, we read of God’s love for the poor. We read that we are not to mistreat aliens, widows, or orphans. We are to leave gleanings to the poor. We are to bring tithes to support aliens, the fatherless, and widows, and all debts are to be cancelled every seventh year. We are not to exploit workers. We should include aliens, the fatherless and widows in our celebrations. We are to plead the case of the

fatherless and defend the rights of the poor. We are warned about using dishonest scales and taking advantage of the vulnerable.

And that is just in the Old Testament. That is just what this rich man had access to, but we now also have the words of Christ. The Bible as a whole contains about 2,000 verses that relate to money and our obligations to the poor and oppressed. As a little experiment, some seminarians once went through the whole Bible and cut out every verse that made reference to the poor – cut it right out of the Bible. When they finished, the Bible was in shreds, literally falling apart. It was a Bible full of holes. Cut out of that Bible were verses like Mary's Magnificat, where she sings about the poor being exalted and the rich sent away empty. Gone were verses like Jesus saying that when we do things for the "least of these" we are doing them unto Jesus. Cut out from that Bible were the words of Jesus' first public appearance, where he spoke of bringing good news to the poor. Snipped out was "Blessed are the poor." Certainly gone were many of the words of James, including this: "If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?" and "Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you." Words of instruction to us about wealth are in all four of the Gospels, in Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, Hebrews, James, 1 Peter, 1 John. The list just goes on and on. It is clear that we are to care for those who are in need, just like that little girl loved most the doll that needed the most love.

But we have to open our eyes to the suffering around us. We cannot just pull down the shades while the eyes of the poor are staring at us and the food on our plates. We must not just step around or over – physically or metaphorically – the people we encounter on our way. We have Moses and the prophets *plus* a man raised from the dead, all who remind us of our calling to reach out to others. If we fail to do so, we will miss out on the kingdom of God – not just in the world to come, but in this world, for it is in connecting with others that we find the face of God. It

is in loving one another that we are closer tied to our God. It is in showing God's love for the weak and the downtrodden that we ourselves find God's love.

We recently hosted a screening of the film "The Phoenix: Hope is Rising." The film tells the story of C-U at Home, and The Phoenix, which is a drop-in center for people who are homeless. It is a moving documentary and I encourage you to see it, if you have not already. There are people in great need, people without homes, right here in our community. The Phoenix offers a safe place for people to relax, play a board game, have a cup of coffee. They need additional volunteers to help with that ministry, so this is just one tangible way that you can help someone in need in our community. The Mission Team can help with plenty of other ideas, as well, of ways we can serve. So many of us are already serving "the least of these," as Jesus says in Matthew 25, and there are always opportunities for others to join in. We can make a tremendous difference in the lives of children of God in need. However we go about it, our lives should be lived following the words and example of Jesus Christ in seeking out the ones most in need of love and giving them that love. Lazarus is at our gates. In loving him, we will discover the love of God. Amen.