

SERMON**JULY 13, 2025**

Luke 16: 19-31 (The Message) Rev. Tessin

The Rich Man and Lazarus

19-21 “There once was a rich man, expensively dressed in the latest fashions, wasting his days in conspicuous consumption. A poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, had been dumped on his doorstep. All he lived for was to get a meal from scraps off the rich man’s table. His best friends were the dogs who came and licked his sores.

22-24 “Then he died, this poor man, and was taken up by the angels to the lap of Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In hell and in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham in the distance and Lazarus in his lap. He called out, ‘Father Abraham, mercy! Have mercy! Send Lazarus to dip his finger in water to cool my tongue. I’m in agony in this fire.’

25-26 “But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that in your lifetime you got the good things and Lazarus the bad things. It’s not like that here. Here he’s consoled and you’re tormented. Besides, in all these matters there is a huge chasm set between us so that no one can go from us to you even if he wanted to, nor can anyone cross over from you to us.’

27-28 “The rich man said, ‘Then let me ask you, Father: Send him to the house of my father where I have five brothers, so he can tell them the score and warn them so they won’t end up here in this place of torment.’ **29** “Abraham answered, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets to tell them the score. Let them listen to them.’

30 “‘I know, Father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but they’re not listening. If someone came back to them from the dead, they would change their ways.’ **31** “Abraham replied, ‘If they won’t listen to Moses and the Prophets, they’re not going to be convinced by someone who rises from the dead.’”

Sermon Title: “You Can’t Take It With You”

This season of camping and campfires brings us around to the tradition of – telling ghost stories! Something about sitting in the darkness with the slight drop in temperature, the sounds of night surrounding you, adds sensory elements to

the emotions we bring out in hearing these stories of the afterlife interacting with the living. Now, not all ghost stories are meant to scare you. In the movie from the 1990's, *Ghost*, Patrick Swayze plays a young man who finds himself viewing the life he left behind after his death, but unable to interact with anyone but one woman who is able to hear him, played by Whoopi Goldberg. He works with her to warn his fiancée of the dangers of being around his former best friend – the one who had him murdered in order to cover up financial crimes. He's able to warn and save her, bringing a feeling of justice when the villain is accidentally killed and taken away by the dark forces to the underworld.

Then there is another story of the dead coming back to warn the living, to persuade them to change their behavior: the classic story from Charles Dickens, 'A Christmas Carol'. In this ghost story, Ebenezer Scrooge is a rich man who is stingy with his wealth, stingy with his time, stingy with his emotions. In a night time visit from three different ghosts – the Ghosts of Christmas' Past, Present and Future – he is warned of the consequences of his current behavior, and when he wakes in the morning to a new day, he begins a new course in life, changing how he uses his money, his time, and opens himself to feelings of friendship and love. It's the ultimate turnaround story – a human being who's selfish, negative, unlikeable – and his redemption by heeding voices from the afterlife a, story of second chances and the redemption we can hope for in this life.

Stories about warnings from those who have died before us are a returning theme in books, plays, movies. And Jesus told his own story of the afterlife, of justice, and lessons to be learned by those that precede them in death. In his Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, we have the comparison of two characters: one unnamed, only referred to as "the rich man", and a second character named Lazarus, the only character given a name in all of Jesus' parables.

Let's first look at Lazarus. Lazarus is not just poor, but poor to the point of begging for the food he needs to survive. We're told he's covered in sores, and that the only living things caring for him were the dogs that came up to him as he lay in the doorway. The paraphrase we read said he was dumped at this doorstep. The Greek word used to describe this was also used to describe the actions of the friends that lowered the paralyzed man through the roof and begged for Jesus' healing of their friend. But we don't see in this story who left Lazarus there – their presence is long gone. Lazarus is alone in life, just hoping for the leftovers from the feasts being eaten *inside* the house as he lays *outside* of it. He's poor in money; poor in physical health; poor in relationship.

Does it mean something that this character in a parable was given a name? Biblical scholars have hashed around for centuries. Lazarus is the Greek version of the Hebrew name Eliazer, which means “God helps.” Eliazer was the name of Moses’ oldest son, and Moses explained this naming by saying in Exodus, “The God of my father was my help, and delivered me” And the first patriarch in the Old Testament, Abraham, had a trusted servant named Eliazer, who he planned to inherit his vast wealth if he died without children. So this name of Eliazer, Lazarus, could possibly have been intended by Jesus to evoke Moses and Abraham in the story of the Jewish people, helping his listeners’ connect to images of trust, help, provision.

But Lazarus’ help, his comfort, only comes in the afterlife. Jesus’ story shifts midway to the afterlife, with both men dying. In what we assume is heaven, Lazarus is being comforted by Abraham who holds him in his lap, to his “bosom”, almost a maternal image of being not just comforted but finally being fed. In life, Lazarus was unseen. In death, Lazarus was seen by the angels and Abraham; Lazarus is finally getting the care he needed. We don’t hear that he devoutly prayed; we don’t hear anything about his faith. We can’t assume he gets this treatment in the afterlife because of anything he did to earn it. We only see compassion – finally – and the grace of unearned love.

The second character, a rich man, is one character that Jesus’ often built into his short stories. Unlike Lazarus, this rich man was unnamed, allowing him to take on an everyman role for the listener. What do we know about him? We are only told what he wears and what he eats, all for the benefit of the attention it gives him. I don’t really like Eugene Petersen’s paraphrase of his clothing – “wearing the latest fashions” – because it takes away most of the meaning the original Greek conveyed. In literal translation into English, this rich man dressed in “purple linen.” This was the cloth, including that color, that Leviticus said was reserved for the priests in the Tabernacle and Temple in Jerusalem. This was reserved for the faith leaders of that time. So the rich man’s sumptuous feasting, his attire, were not only conspicuous consumption – for everyone around him to know just how rich he was – but Jesus’ point in including that detail is this: the rich man’s clothing was also sending a message to everyone around him: Here’s the god I worship. My money. And this lavish lifestyle blinds him to someone laying at his own doorstep.

We don’t know any more about the rich man, or what specifically landed him in hell and brimstone. Did he not give tithes to the Temple? Did he fail to say prayers? Did he treat his family poorly? Just because it isn’t in the story doesn’t

mean he didn't have faith in God, didn't live a religious life. The one thing we do know is about a tiny issue of how he used, or didn't use, his wealth and resources In Jesus' story, in the rich man's suffering, he had the ability to see Lazarus in the arms of Abraham. He first asks for relief from that suffering. Then he asks for help in ensuring his brothers, who must have been cut from the same cloth so to speak, wouldn't face the same fate as himself. In his comfort when he was living, he couldn't seem to see Lazarus. In his suffering, suddenly he can see him. Remember that point

We've been asking ourselves who we might identify with in the parables we've explored this summer. So: Who are you in this story? After seeing news clips of the conspicuous consumption laid in front of the world a couple weeks ago of an obscenely lavish wedding in Italy paid for by our own consumption delivered right to our doorstep, I can hear myself talking in my head saying: I'm certainly not THAT, so I guess I don't need to identify with the rich man. But watching the suffering around the world – the starvation of the people in Gaza and South Sudan, the children playing in war rubble, people dying of famine and preventable diseases in Africa – well, if I'm honest with myself, I'm certainly not Lazarus. I'm resourced: I have food to eat, shelter over my head, friends and family that emotionally support me. So, what am I supposed to do with this story?

It's easy to jump in and assume this story is a judgement against the wealthy. But Jesus is NOT telling us to be judgmental about wealthy people. Jesus only taught that "it is easier to get a camel through the eye of a needle than it is for the rich to get into heaven." Difficult, but not impossible. Jesus did not teach that every one with large financial resources is fated to hell and damnation. But Jesus is reminding us that money allows us to trust too much in our own means to provide security versus placing our trust in God, and it can get our priorities off track. Jesus' teaching throughout the gospels is a caution to us on money's lure, and our inclinations to use it inappropriately.

And Jesus didn't teach that poor people need to suck it up and accept their lot in life because it's easier for them to get into heaven. The Bible teaches throughout that we are not to leave the poor destitute, but to work to alleviate their poverty in this life. Jesus' teaching in the beatitudes was, "Blessed are the poor," because it is easier to rely on God without the blinders of money in your line of sight.

If the rich man or Lazarus aren't who you identify with, how do we draw meaning from Jesus' story? The character of Father Abraham is the clue to what

this story means for each of us listening to this story today. The rich man never speaks to Lazarus – not when he is laying at his doorstep, not when he is laying in the arms of Abraham. We're told "the rich man called out, 'Father Abraham, mercy! Have mercy! Send Lazarus to dip his finger in water to cool my tongue. I'm in agony in this fire.'" When denied that, he starts thinking about others – but it's his brothers, probably living just as he did. "The rich man said, 'Then let me ask you, Father (Abraham): (Then) Send (Lazarus) to the house of my father where I have five brothers, so he can tell them the score and warn them so they won't end up here in this place of torment.'" The rich man is only talking about Lazarus in the third person. The rich man *still refuses* to interact directly with Lazarus. He speaks around him, only addressing Abraham. "Send Lazarus to dip his finger in water" "Send Lazarus to the house of my father" The rich man acts as if Lazarus is a heavenly servant to him, not even giving Lazarus the dignity of addressing him directly. Even in death, the rich man acts as if Lazarus is invisible. He is still unable to really see him.

And this is the point of Jesus' story: the rich man's sin is not having wealth. The rich man's sin isn't wearing very nice clothes and eating delicacies every day. The rich man's sin is being blinded to the needs right in front of him. It is failing to recognize the humanity of Lazarus, and failing to treat him with dignity. And so we hear Abraham, speaking God's response, to the rich man: you found your comfort in the luxuries of life while living. He may have said, 'Don't bother Lazarus – now he's finally getting comfort. You barely saw Lazarus enough to step over him outside his home.' And the final shutdown: no one is going back to warn your brothers, including Lazarus. They should know the consequences of their priorities, by reading and reflecting on the teachings of Moses and the prophets. God has already sent his warning. It's in the writings of scripture.

But the rich man isn't giving up. "I know, I know – I ignored those warning also. But if someone came back from the dead, now THAT would get their attention!" Just like Scrooge's night with the ghosts – Scare his brothers into changing! And the final line of the story is God's response, through the mouth of Abraham: 'If they won't listen to Moses and the Prophets, they're not going to be convinced by someone who rises from the dead.'"

There may be two meanings to this ending to the story. Jesus' may have been alluding to those that would eventually deny him, the many that wouldn't even be scared into believing in him, scared into following his teaching, after he was resurrected from the dead. But Jesus' listeners, sitting right in front of him – the ones this story was directed to originally – hadn't yet had an encounter with the resurrected Lord. So it's unlikely he was only speaking to the future – he was

speaking to them in their here and now. His listeners had the teachings of Moses and the prophets. They had the guidance needed to know how to continue to be children of Abraham, to inherit the kingdom of God. It's worshipping God, not money. It's loving their neighbor as themselves. How much more should they need to understand the way to the kingdom of God?

As we hear the story again today, we need to ponder the same change that Jesus was asking his followers: What *does* it take to follow these teachings? (hold up Bible) What is blinding you from applying it to your own conspicuous consumption, your own status, living as if it will never end? What is keeping you from seeing what's right at your doorstep, what's right in front of you? We still make the neighbor laid at our own door invisible; we regularly push out of our sight those in need around us. It's painful to see the suffering of others; it's painful to sacrifice a little of our own comfort to be a comfort to others. So we convince ourselves: they're not deserving. They should have gotten an education, they should just get a better job, they should buy their own healthcare, they should stay in their own country. We didn't cause them to end up as they are, so why should we concern ourselves? And we avert our eyes, stepping over their proverbial bodies in our personal doorways so that we can enjoy the things in life we think we've "earned", that we feel we "deserve." Assuming no visits from the afterlife mean everything is just as it should be. But, as Jesus said through his story: no ghost is coming back to give us one last chance. The warning has already been given. The irony of this parable is: what the rich man asked Abraham to make Lazurus do – warn his brothers of the consequences blind self-absorbed living – this is what the parable does for readers. Would the five brothers, who had been taught the Old Testament's insistence to "love the neighbor," "love the stranger," listen to that warning from someone come back from the dead? We don't know. There wasn't a last-chance option given.

All we can know is what we choose to see and hear, how we open ourselves up to what is laying in front of us. Will we see it? Will we let it be invisible to us? Patrick Swayze or the Ghosts of Christmas aren't coming to give us a second chance. The warnings from heaven are available to us. Are we listening?

Amen.