



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
 Asheville, North Carolina
 25 September 2022
 Sermon: Before the Work Has Even Begun
 Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

Luke 16:19-31

Luke 16:19-31 (NRSV)

"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.'"

Do you think this unnamed rich man ever even noticed Lazarus before his death?

There's a famous 16th Century painting by Pieter Bruegel (Broy-gal) the Elder entitled "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus." You'll remember in Greek Mythology, Icarus and his father flew in the sky with wings crafted from feathers and wax, but Icarus flew too close to the sun. The wax melted, and he fell to the

sea and drowned. In the painting, you barely notice Icarus. There he is, off in a corner. You only see his legs as he plunges into the water. And looking back at the painting, you notice every other character is looking away from Icarus's fall. The ships both head in the opposite direction. The man and his horse, the shepherd and his dog all have their back turned. Even the sheep do not bother to turn around. It's not that they are maliciously ignoring Icarus's peril. It's more like they simply fail to take notice. Their attention is pointed elsewhere.¹

This 500-year-old painting captures a tragic element of our lives: the frequent invisibility of suffering. But Jesus's parable for today deepens this reality, by illustrating how the often-hidden-fact of suffering is not just happenstance; rather, systems of injustice simultaneously create great suffering, and also hide it away. So, for example,

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.

Do you think this unnamed rich man ever noticed Lazarus before his death? Or, rather, did the gates around his property, his rich feasts, his fine linen blind him to the suffering just outside. How do systems of privilege impact what we see and don't see? A commentator on this passage asks poignantly, "Where is the invisible suffering in our world: the suffering of women and children in sweatshops, who are invisible behind the labels we buy; the suffering of animals in factory farms, who are invisible behind our fast food; the suffering of the suspect who is tortured behind locked doors to calm our cancerous fears?"²

Going deeper, we see how one's participation in such systems can warp the mind and the soul. Notice, for example, even when the tables are turned in the afterlife, how the rich man, even in his state of torture, can only view Lazarus as his servant. He never even addresses him directly:

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."

¹ This analysis is greatly influenced by W.H. Auden's "Musee des Beaux Arts." See <http://english.emory.edu/classes/paintings&poems/auden.html>

² Scott Bader-Saye, "Theological Perspective: Luke 16:19-31," in *Feasting on the Word—Year C, Volume 4*, edited by David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p. 118.

Even when their states are reversed, the rich man still cannot see Lazarus as anything other than an object to serve him.

Then, father, I beg you, he says, to send Lazarus to my father's house—for I have five brothers—that he may warn them.

This story speaks into our own context; it disrupts and invites us to reexamine that which brings comfort at the expense of others' suffering. It is a part of a larger disruption and invitation woven through the entirety of the Gospel:

“God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly,” sings Mary (Luke, ch. 2)

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours in the kingdom of God...But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation
(Luke, ch. 6)

This invitation, this disruption should be obvious to us by now. But oddly that has not been the case, in the history of the Church, with passages such as this one.

There was once a schism in the small Southern Baptist church where I grew up. When I was a teenager, a small but noticeable number of church members left the congregation over the senior pastor's remarks on hell during a sermon.

Keep in mind that I was only about 15 years old at the time of that sermon, but I have a distinct memory of sitting in the pew and listening to the Rev. Dr. Terry Jones deliver it from the pulpit. It's the only sermon of his that I have any memory of whatsoever. I believe that the sermon was spurred not by Dr. Jones, the senior pastor, but by my youth minister, who had a penchant for preaching grace during youth group meetings, saying things like he could not believe in a God who would condemn someone to an eternity of hell.

The senior pastor was called up to clarify some points and he did, in that memorable sermon. I remember Dr. Jones also preached grace. He proclaimed that in Christ God reconciled the world to God's self, and, though people certainly can and do live in a hell of our own making, God does not condemn us for eternity. The idea of a good and gracious God is incompatible with the tyrant deity of certain sections of evangelical Christianity, who throws lost souls into the eternal

fire for their unbelief. You can imagine how formative this teaching of grace over judgment was for me.

But, as I said at the beginning of the story, a schism occurred. Some people left the church because of this sermon. I remember very distinctly, an adult leader in our youth group, someone I really liked and respected, left the church.

And that is the irony of today's passage, this passage meant to break down that which cut us off from one another: wealth, privilege, ignorance, egotism. Rather than aiding us to see each other, this passage and passages like it, are more often used to divide us further: the saved and damned, those in and those out, my right faith and your sinful disbelief.

Rather than breaking down chasms, the church has used this passage to dig them deeper. This passage, condemning our apathy towards the suffering of others, has been weaponized, causing untold suffering in the history of the Church.

Yesterday, members of our church community and staff took part in Blue Ridge Pride. We have the rainbow paraments up today to continue that celebration of those from LGBTQAI+ communities inside and outside of these walls.

In speaking of the history of the church, we cannot forget how members of LGBTQAI+ communities have particularly been the subject of abusive readings of passages like the one we are reading today. The church has always been far more ready to condemn someone to hell for their sexuality or gender identity than it has been to look more closely at its own avarice and greed. The church has been far more ready to dig greater chasms, policing who we love, than to look at its own involvement in systems that constantly push Lazarus out to the margin to suffer.

But that is not Jesus's aim in telling this parable. Jesus did not ask us to build higher walls in this world but to tear them down; this story is not meant to give Biblical support to a doctrine of eternal torment; it is rather meant to wake up the believing community from its apathy, its complicity, its collusion with those systems that create suffering today.

For we worship a God of grace;
a God by the side of those who suffer, those made to feel invisible;
the God who stands with those pushed out of the church and into the margins.

Thanks be to God for this Word.

May we hear it in order to grow in grace.

May it continue to open us to one another; to celebrate and cherish one another and those outside this community.

May it lead us to tear down systems and cultures of privilege, inequity, and invisibility, in the name of the God of love and justice. Amen.