

What did you do for Lazarus. A sermon preached on June 3, 2018 at St. Giles' Presbyterian Church, Prince George, BC by Rev. Herb Hildera

A troubling

A disturbing

A very current parable William read from Luke's Gospel

For hardly a month goes by without some mention somewhere – news media, social media, personal story – of the growing gap between the rich and the poor,

The have and have nots

While there certainly are important disagreements about the causes, consequences and solutions to the inequality,

That inequality is undeniable.

The history and decline of civilizations are often defined by certain things,

And one of those things remains – how did that society, era; people treat their poor, their unfortunate, and their marginalized.

The answers to that question affect our politics, health care, education, housing, employment, legal system, priorities, as well as our ability to be civil, compassionate, empathetic and graceful.

We need to be clear on what the parable is not:

It is too easy to say the purpose of the parable is so Jesus can describe the furniture of heaven and the temperatures of hell

This parable is not some topographical map of heaven and hell, showing little lines of steep heights up to heaven and little lines showing the deep descent into hell and little lines showing a deep gully between the two.

Nor does Jesus tell the parable to give us the weather conditions – hell is insufferably hot and heaven pleasantly balmy.

Nor is the parable simplistic proof that the rich go to hell and the poor go to heaven. However, wealth without mercy for the poor is a great wickedness!

There are many stories of rich people going to heaven – Abraham. David, Solomon
Finally, Jesus does not tell the parable to blanketly condemn the super-rich or to blatantly commend the level of poverty experienced by Lazarus.

Frankly, there is little if anything noble about such want and poverty!

The parable sets up contrasts to highlight the gap between the two men

--the rich man – unnamed by Luke. Later Biblical commentators give him the name Dives – which in Latin means wealthy.

The rich man is not just rich – he has royal
 purpose clothing of the finest materials
 Purple is the colour of royalty and cloth dyed this
 color is frightfully expensive
 It's is the modern day equivalent of Armani \$5,000+
 bespoke suits,
 Complemented by bespoke Egyptian cotton shirts,
 bespoke shoes
 And a Versace or Hermes tie
 Further this rich man does not just have plenty of
 food – he feasts sumptuously every day

Presumably therefore, he has a portfolio to
 bankroll this whole operation indefinitely

LAZARUS – means God has helped

He is not just poor

He has been cast down – dumped – at the gate of
 this rich man's house

Implying that he cannot move on his own.

He is not only covered with ulcers: dogs – then

believed to be unclean and despised, lick his sores

He is not just hungry – he is hoping for crumbs and
 there is no indication that he got any!

These earthly contrasts then set the
 stage for the real drama of difference.

For, in time, death comes to both the rich man and
 Lazarus.

Lazarus finds himself living in gates of splendor

The rich man quickly discovers his accommodations are well below his accustomed standards

No housekeeping service here to turn down his bed at night and put a chocolate mint on his pillow!

No concierge present to see if another room can be arranged a little higher up!

Father Abraham carefully explains to the rich man, the realities of the present situation

Yet the rich man still does not get it does he?

Vs 27 – Lazarus is STILL seen by the rich man as one to do the rich man's bidding – what arrogance and tunnel vision the rich man shows!

Really! Really rich man

Do you not get it that things have changed?

You cannot just give orders or make such demands!

But my 5 brothers Father Abraham – they must be warned lest they come to this place of torment

Resonances of Jacob Marley's ghost speaking to Ebenezer Scrooge in Dicken's Christmas Carol – how long the chains Scrooge has already forged in this life

I wonder how far along in similar attitudes are each of the 5 brothers of the rich man.

Abraham's response to the rich man and here *is I believe an intersection or touch point of the parable to us.*

*The living have all the information that they need,
 All the warnings,
 All the instruction from the law and the prophets
 Add to this, we who live in the light of Easter, have the
 presence of the risen Christ to be a lodestar in our lives
 If the living choose not to listen to all this – including
 how we are to treat all others – especially the
 marginalized – then they will not be changed or
 convinced by some personal miracle*

GOTCHA!

While most parables do resist simply analogy or comparisons,

Nevertheless I think here there are some important intersecting, touch points for us today

We are not Lazarus – although we may be poor and sick

We are not the rich man – even though by the world's standards we are incredibly wealth, blessed and privileged

Both the rich man and Lazarus are dead – they are therefore in God's hands – and not – as is the case of the rich man.

God has found the rich man definitely wanting!

Who then are we?

I think we are the rich man's siblings.

And I am going to take some poetic license with the text and say WE are his brothers and sisters!

*WE are living our lives each day and always being
challenged and called as God's people to model the life of
Jesus*

Part of that modelling is to be aware, to show
compassion, care, grace, time and yes material
goods with the Lazarus' of this world
To realize and not in an over syrupy way
Or judgey wudgey way – “there but for the grace of
God go I”

When I was growing up in Welland, my two
very best friends were David and Stuart McLeod –
the sons of the minister of my home church of St.
Andrew's.

They lived just down the street

The three of us therefore shared a lot of time
together and part of that time was at the manse –
the church house

While we were there either playing outside or
inside,

Many people came to the door seeking aid, help,
funding, counselling – who were not members of
the church,

Clearly Lazarus types – people who were down and
out,

People who just couldn't get their lives together

People who had made bad choices,

People who were in need.

Half a century on, such people still exist, but they no longer carry the stereotypical characteristics and behavior I remember as a kid.

And there a lot more Lazarus's out there.

Food banks are here to stay

Substance abuse is no longer limited to alcohol.

Add to these realities the fact that many working even two minimum wage jobs have to balance – food for the family or rent, Prescription or utility bill.

I suspect these folk existed in the Welland of my childhood and as they existed in most communities,

But the numbers are much greater today.

And what I am seeing with greater frequency is generational hard times!!!

Can I see Lazarus at the gate?

You better believe it.

Every week people call or drop by the office – sort of a gate – because a they have heard we have emergency food hampers, vouchers for groceries or they have heard that sometimes we have helped with rent,

An electrical bill or meds not covered by another agency.

The Benevolent Fund here has and shall continue to offer token support to the Lazarus' at the gate

But let me tell you,

It remains a real struggle at times when someone is obviously under the influence of something, Approaches us with a sense of entitlement \ or when a group come in a car and come into the office one at a time as though they are unconnected. At such times I wonder, am I, are we here enabling, rather than really helping. At such times it is hard not to be on the rich man's side of the gate.

Can you see Lazarus at the gate?
 If you cannot, you are either dangerously unaware of the world around you or you have chosen to close your minds to the more unpleasant and unsettling aspects of life in the here and now And like it or not, you may well be moving toward aping the rich man of the parable's mindset and attitude.
 Jesus clearly tells us that rich man's fate!!!

Lazarus' at our gates exist – fact!
 As symbolic of the Rich Man's siblings, what can we do that is manageable, practical and models the ways of Jesus?

BE AWARE, BE EDUCATED.

I know the first time Josiah Barton who works for Youth for Christ – one of the mission projects we as a congregation support – came to speak about his

work there was more than one audible gasp as he told true Lazarus at the gate stories unfolding here in Prince George.

One of the most important books I have read in recent years about the struggles of the minimum wage and urban poor is Barbara Ehrenreich's Nickel and Dimed to Death. On not getting by in America Ehrenreich is a noted journalist and author.

She took up the challenge of writing about the wages available to the unskilled –in particular the millions of women – many single moms who enter or have to enter the labour market owing to government claw backs in the social assistance programmes.

It is a well written, sympathetic if not troubling book.

Getting involved in some anti-poverty programme or agency is not for everyone,

But it is yet another way of being educated and aware of the situation in which too many live daily

AS YOU ARE ABLE – BE GENEROUS to those agencies,

To those individuals who are front line workers in narrowing the gap and the inequality between the rich and the poor,

Those agencies trying to assist single parents,

Or families where the breadwinner is sick, missing or just plain lazy.

PAY LESS ATTENTION TO THE SOCIAL AND NEWS MEDIAS PREFERENCES TO LOOK UP TO THE LIVES OF THE RICH AND FAMOUS

I remember at the time of Michael Jackson's death and funeral, One editorial made the following and very sobering comment – perspective giving actually. It was estimated said the editorial that about a billion people watched Michael Jackson's memorial service On that very same day, worldwide -25,000 children under the age of 5 died, mostly from poverty related causes and there was no fanfare or ceremony. We did not even see them, concluded the editorial!

AS YOU SEEK TO HELP YOUR LAZARUS' AT THE GATES, REALIZE THAT "THERE BUT FOR THE GRACE OF GOD GO I!"

Over the years, I have heard many stories from the Lazarus' at the gate.
 Bad choices,
 Bad genes
 Bad family or no family life
 Wrong place at the wrong time,
 Dumb friends

Hearing so many of these sorts of stories over the years, I have come to see how different my life might have been without supportive parents, a community of faith, opportunities for education, Stable home life.

Wise counsel –for I could have made some really bone headed choices as I look back...

Done some really stupid things had friends and family not said –I don't think so Herb!

In the end, what we are able to accomplish,
 the positive differences we are able to make
 The help we are able to give to others
 The mercy we are able to show in what are at
 times very unmerciful and uncivil situations
 The forgiveness we are able to offer and
 receive,

Is all grace – the grace of God in Jesus Christ.
 It is nothing we have earned – IT IS GIFT –
 LAVISHLY GIVEN.

A question with which I think the parable leaves us is simply this – *how can we who have been so richly blessed, not share or show to others – all others – that same sort of blessing, that same sort of grace we have been shown by our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ?*