

Riverside United Church
February 2, 2025

Scripture Lesson: Luke 16: 19-31

The Rich Man and Lazarus

‘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.” ’

Prayer of Illumination:

God of Life, may the words of my mouth,
and the meditations of all our minds and hearts,
lead us to deeper understanding of you,
and the love you call us to live. Amen.

“What we are meant to do and be: #2 - To make the powerful care”

What on earth would have convinced the rich man to care about Lazarus at his gate?

What on earth would have prompted the rich man to notice Lazarus at his gate?

What on earth would have turned the focus of the rich man from himself and his family towards any concern for Lazarus - in life or in death?

Today, we hear this intriguing story from Luke’s gospel - sometimes called a parable, sometimes not, and it is a story that reminds us that Jesus talks about economic matters - about wealth and

about poverty more than he talked about anything else. The stories of Jesus are uncomfortable because we live in a context where we have divided life up into departments - and therefore isolated and sidelined religion from most of the day to day reality of seeking to live in the wonder and complexity of our humanity.

Today, we continue our Epiphany series of reflections based on the words to the hymn "I am the Light of the World." And Epiphany is the season of light and recognizing how Holy light shines into our midst - sometimes with a bright flash of revelation, more often in the little glimpses that bring insight, comfort, focus, peace. The lyrics to the hymn remind us poetically of the some of the work that Holy light exposes; the work that needs to be done in our lives and world as we embrace the invitation to be followers of Jesus.

So, as the Epiphany season moves now into the month of February, you may be pleased to know that this morning when I went outside, I didn't see my shadow, so there will only be four more weeks of this sermon series.

This series emerged in my mind and soul as a couple of phrases leapt off the screen when we were singing it a few weeks ago. "To heal the broken soul with love." And then "To make the powerful care." Seemed easier then to think about what it would mean to make the powerful care.

How do we make the rich man care about Lazarus at the gate, or about those who need food banks, or who don't have adequate shelter or who live with addictions, or who can't get a job because of their race or age, or who are denied dignity because their gender identity is declared non-existent.

The biblical story speaks of the rich man recognizing the limit of his thinking or his ignoring, but only after death and only because he is outraged that Lazarus has a higher position in the afterlife than he does. He realizes it may be too late for him, so he gets the idea that if someone goes to warn his brothers, then they will be convinced to show care and compassion.

At his point the story may seem unmerciful because the narrator doesn't buy the rich man's plea for this brothers.

One of the challenges of interpreting Christianity in our time, is that so often we think that the goal of faith is favourable salvation after death. Yet, in this story that reversal of fortune is used as a teaching tool that life on this side of death is important, life on this side of death matters to faithfulness. It is not just about warnings and fear tactics; it's about loving our neighbour and living with mercy

Our world lives with tremendous differentials of power. There are times when I feel quite powerless when I think about the economic systems and corporations who control so much of the economy. There are times when I know that I have more power and advantage than many in our

world, in our community because of factors that have given me privilege - education, race, gender, etc.

So, when I reflect on the phrase “to make the powerful care,” there is a bit of looking in the mirror that I need to do, but I also realize there is much that seems beyond my power to influence or change. And that can be distressing and depressing. And yet our challenge as followers of Jesus is to be the voices that act beyond selfishness and greed, to listen to the teachings of Holy wisdom, and to be convinced that there is another way of living and acting than the unrestricted way of greed and selfishness that seems so dominant in our society and world.

Over the past couple of weeks we have lived with the early days of President Trump and it seems that each day out does that day before in lessening any tone of respect, or reason or grace. It will be interesting to see how voices and values that disagree with him are able to be heard or empowered to speak.

I imagine that some of you have seen the wisdom offered by the Episcopal Bishop of Washington at the National Cathedral, the Rt. Rev. Marian Edgar Budde the day after the inauguration. She ended her sermon with the words:

“Let me make one final plea, Mr. President. Millions have put their trust in you, and as you told the nation yesterday, you have felt the providential hand of a loving God. In the name of our God, I ask you to have mercy upon the people in our country who are scared now. There are gay, lesbian, and transgender children in Democratic, Republican, and independent families, some who fear for their lives. The people who pick our crops and clean our office buildings, who labor in poultry farms and meat-packing plants, who wash the dishes after we eat in restaurants and work the night shifts in hospitals, they may not be citizens or have the proper documentation, but the vast majority of immigrants are not criminals. They pay taxes and are good neighbors. They are faithful members of our churches and mosques, synagogues, gurdwara, and temples

I ask you to have mercy, Mr. President, on those in our communities whose children fear their parents will be taken away, and that you help those who are fleeing war zones and persecution in their own lands to find compassion and welcome here. Our God teaches us that we are to be merciful to the stranger, for we were all once strangers in this land. May God grant us the strength and courage to honor the dignity of every human being, to speak the truth to one another in love, and to walk humbly with each other and our God, for the good of all people, the good of all people in this nation and the world. Amen.”

Her faithful words and gentle tone may have been a model of how to make the powerful care, but the powerful may choose not to hear. The next day, the president was calling for an apology. He wrote: the so-called Bishop ...was a radical left hard line Trump-hater. She brought her church into the world of politics in a very ungracious way. She was nasty in tone, and not compelling or smart... She is not very good at her job! She and her church owe the public an apology!"

Well, she is not offering an apology and it is revealing that religious leaders on the day of inauguration - those who are preaching a Christian nationalism - were not called out for bringing the their churches into the world of politics.

One of the things that impressed me about Bishop Budde's words is the plea for mercy. It's a plea for compassion, for care, a call for the recognition that human beings should be able to expect a base level of dignity and respect. Mercy can be lived out across other divides of ideology and perspectives. Mercy for one another across difference, and mercy extended to those who have little power or agency to speak or change their situation.

What on earth will it take for the Lazaruses to be noticed? What will it take for care, compassion and dignity to be shared across the continuum of power. The bullies think that fear and intimidation are the way to live power, but we know that mercy and justice are the way to a renewed world.

So we need a tidal wave of mercy to transform this polarized hatred that is becoming so dominant. Right now that almost seems like an impossible goal, but we remember that there is the power of compassion, the acceptance of difference, the power of love that needs to continue to be lived so that Holy Light is known and we and humanity can discover what we are meant to do and be.