

You Can't Take it With You©

1 Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31

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What a sad image Jesus paints for us as we envision poor Lazarus, laying at the gate of the rich man, begging for food, covered with sores that the dogs lick – causing him more misery. Who among us would not notice this poor sick beggar lying half dead at the entry of our gated community? What would we do, if we were in the same place as the rich man?

I wonder, did he see Lazarus when he came in and out of the gate? Did he notice him lying there when he looked out his window? Was Lazarus so invisible to the rich man that he was just nothing? No concern of his?

But, apparently, he did know something about him. He sure knew the name when the tables were turned and he was begging Father Abraham to have Lazarus come bring him even a tiny drop of cool water because he was so miserable down in Hades.

Interesting, isn't it, that even there in that miserable place where the rich man was now suffering – he still seemed to think it was all about him. He continued to try and take control and use Lazarus as his servant.

Which causes me to wonder if Lazarus might have actually been his servant until he got sick and was no longer of any use to the rich man. Then, was thrown out into the street, the same way the left over garbage was thrown out?

I read the passage today from the New King James Version of the Bible because I like the way it is written.

²²“So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s bosom.”

Most of the more contemporary translations say that Lazarus was carried to Abrahams “side,” or just “to be with Abraham.” I guess they decided Abrahams bosom was not a good image.

Remember that song?

“Rock a my soul in the bosom of Abraham,
Rock a my soul in the bosom of Abraham,
Rock a my soul in the bosom of Abraham,
Oh, rock a my soul.”

I think it is a very comforting image. In life here on earth, Lazarus had no comfort, no tender care, no physical love ... at least not in these later years, it appears.

The name Lazarus literally means “God will help.” Yet, it sure looked like God wasn't helping him in life. No, but when he died it was mercy and love; it was the tenderness of the angels that carried him to the very bosom of Father Abraham where he was welcomed and held close

to Abraham's heart. There he knew love and grace and healing. There, in the bosom of Abraham he found home. God's help was eternal.

How do you feel when you read about the fate of the rich man? Do you feel a sense of justice? Is it only fair that he would end up suffering after death because of how he allowed Lazarus to suffer before death? Do you feel sadness for the rich man who is told by Father Abraham that there is now such a deep chasm between where the rich man is, and where Lazarus is, with Abraham, that it can never ever be crossed?

And when he finally realizes that there is no hope for him, he begs Abraham to at least send Lazarus back to warn his brothers; to tell them how important it is to care for the poor, to have compassion on those who are hurting and sick so they won't end up in the same eternal misery he finds himself in.

Do you identify more with poor, sick, starving Lazarus, who is in great misery – a hell on earth; or do you have a sense of being more like the rich man?

You all pay me a fair and good salary, but I don't think of myself as being rich – although when I really give it some thought, I know that compared to millions of people in the world, I am very well off. I don't live in a three walled shack with a dirt floor, like I saw in Mexico. I don't have to walk for miles and miles just get a loaf of bread or some clean water to drink like I witnessed in the mountains of Costa Rica.

Speaking of clean water, I don't live in the city that is very close to home where many people are suffering because of lead contaminated water; where they can't yet use the water from their facets to drink or bath in. How utterly miserable!

I sometimes complain about the minerals and the calcium in our water that causes spots on my dishes and glasses and that clogs up the dishwasher or shower nozzle. Oh poor, poor pitiful me!

I was happy to see that our own Presbyterian Disaster Assistance of the Presbyterian Church (USA) has been to visit Flint and is using funds given from the One Great Hour of Sharing offering that we all receive at Easter to help the residents of Flint in this horrific crisis.

I confess that I don't completely understand everything that led up to this water crisis but it does appear that people who would benefit – by either saving money or gaining money – made very poor and inconsiderate decisions without regarding the welfare of citizens who already struggled with low income.

Was that a similar, modern day example of the rich man and Lazarus?

What are some other examples you can think of where the rich abuse their power and wealth to get more power and wealth while the poor suffer and seem invisible?

There may be times in our lives when we do relate to Lazarus. We may be down and out with losing a job, struggling to make ends meet, feeling invisible to those who have the power to help, but choose to ignore you.

You may be among those who feel, with every reason to, that you can't get a break; that the system is against you, that you can't ever rise above the mistake you once made. There seems to be no justice, no compassion, no help.

But there are surely some of us who really relate to the rich man. Not that we mean to be uncaring. Not that we don't care, or don't have compassion.

It's just that if we allow ourselves to really pay attention to that homeless man who sits on the street on the way to Hurley Medical Center, wrapped up in a blanket, sitting in an old lawn chair; or that beggar who limps so badly at the intersection just off the ramp at Miller Road, holding his sign, looking for anyone who will call him over and give him a little something, while they wait for the light to turn green ...

If we allow ourselves to notice, to get involved, to give a dollar, to talk to one of these "little ones" as Jesus calls them; if we look in their faces and hear their voices or touch their hands – well, our hearts might break and we will feel the hopelessness of their situation – and of our own, because we realize the need is too great and we have no idea what to do to truly make a difference.

And so, it's easy to look straight ahead and just not notice; it's easy to tell ourselves they are probably in that place because of something they did – like getting addicted to alcohol or drugs; like spending their money foolishly; like not paying their bills and getting kicked out of their home.

We'll leave it to the social workers and the police and those trained to do what needs to be done. After all, they could be dangerous. Better not take a chance. Better not get involved.

But, you see, this is another parable where Jesus uses hyperbole – exaggerated stories to get the point across. And he is still talking to the leaders of the temple – those stuffy Pharisees and Scribes. He's been telling them about how heaven rejoices when the lost is found, when one person repents.

And now he's telling them this story because they believe that a person who is poor is in that situation because they sinned. They did something to that caused them to be poor and sick. It's their own fault. They are despicable, deplorable people and they deserve their suffering plight in life.

They also believe that the rich man is well off because he has found favor in the eyes of God. God is pleased with him because he is good, and that is why he is rich.

And of course, as always, Jesus turns it all upside down! Once again, Jesus emphasizes how much God loves those who are powerless, those who are marginalized, those who are poor.

When Abraham tells the rich man in Hades that there is no way for Lazarus to go back and warn the rich man's brothers (who probably think and act like he does regarding the poor), he says, "Besides, if they won't listen to Moses and the prophets, they aren't going to listen, even if someone was resurrected from the dead."

Remember how Jesus said it was easier for a camel go to through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God? And the disciples were shocked and one asked, "Lord, then who can possibly get there?" (My own paraphrase)

Jesus answered "For humans it is impossible. But for God, all things are possible."

God actually did send someone who was resurrected from the dead. He sent his own son to die so that sinners like me – and yes, you too – would have grace and mercy because we can't seem to get it right all the time.

And he sent him to rise from the dead, promising us that we too would live after this life; that we too would rise and be with him forever.

But he also sent Jesus, his son, to show us what is most important while we are here on this earth. He is showing us in this parable and he demonstrates it for us in his own life as he cared for the sick, the lepers, the sinners, the outcasts, the lame, the blind, the poor, the prisoners.

And he also sent those who came after Jesus, who wrote books to pass down from generation to generation, teaching us, witnessing to us what Jesus' taught and what God expects.

The author of Timothy says: (The New Living Translation)

¹⁷ Teach those who are rich in this world not to be proud and not to trust in their money, which is so unreliable. Their trust should be in God, who richly gives us all we need for our enjoyment.

¹⁸ Tell them to use their money to do good. They should be rich in good works and generous to those in need, always being ready to share with others. ¹⁹ By doing this they will be storing up their treasure as a good foundation for the future so that they may experience true life.

He said we should live in contentment, helping others because we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it. You can't take it with you, so why not use it for all the good you can?

So, is Jesus saying that being rich, having a lot of resources, is a sin? It doesn't sound like that's the message in Timothy, does it? What I think we are hearing is that it is dangerous to have lots of money. It is a detriment to our souls.

When we are rich, it is so tempting to use it to get more – more money, more stuff, more power. The danger is that we begin to think we deserve it and it becomes easy to think others don't deserve it and to ignore them.

Jesus, and the author of the letter to Timothy, is teaching that there is a better way to use what you have. Throughout the Old and New Testaments, we learn over and over again that God has compassion and mercy for the poor. If we are blessed with wealth, it is our responsibility as God's children to share that wealth, to care for those who are in need.

How do we do it? We can do it through our own mission agencies, through special offerings and organizations, through discretionary funds, working in soup kitchens, shelters, going on mission trips, helping to build houses, giving to and volunteering in the baby pantry, giving food for the food pantry, adopting a child from a third world country – or through an organization that helps poor children in the United States.

The list goes on and on and on. And I happen to think that joining our resources together is a very caring and efficient way to help because we know that the more of us who are working and giving, the more people can be reached and helped.

But I also think that it is so very important for us to actually have one on one, personal contact with people in need; with people who are hurting, who are longing to feel that someone is their friend; to see that light of Christ in the eyes of the one who is shaking your hand, showing you matter.

Our challenge is to think of how we, both individually and as a congregation, can reach out to someone who needs a helping hand, and who needs to have that human touch and a smile.

If we would all just follow and obey the two commandments Jesus said are the greatest, most important of all – to love God with all our hearts, souls, strength and minds, and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves – everything else would fall into place. Don't you think?

You can't take it with you. So let's see how much we can do to help others and to brighten their day - and to be the cause of great rejoicing in heaven.

Amen.