

Lazarus & the Rich Man | Luke 16:19-31; 1 Timothy 6:6-19 |LUMC | Sept 25, 2022 By Rev Grace Kanake

Dear Church family and friends: In the Gospel of St Luke, chapter 15, Jesus rebukes us in many ways, and in chapter 16 he turns to demand proper stewardship of our time, property, money, and wisdom. Our stewardship is explored through the story of Lazarus and the rich man.

The name Lazarus in Hebrew is Eleazar, which means “God Has Helped”. It means in effect that if we do not help the Lazaruses of our time, God will help them by using other ways! God is known to have warned the Jews that if they did not want to worship, God would raise stones in worship.

There are two stories of men named Lazarus in the New Testament. One Lazarus was the brother to Mary and Martha, who died, and Jesus rose him to life. The other Lazarus was a poor man. He is the subject of our sermon today. This Lazarus is the only name attached to the real character in Jesus’ parables. Lazarus’ life is compared to that of a rich man. This Lazarus was a beggar, perhaps homeless not unlike most beggars of our time. When he died, he went to a place of comfort at the bosom of Abraham, and when the rich man died, he went to the place of torment (Hades), and prayed for help.

But Abraham told him it was too late! Lazarus wished that his family and siblings knew what befell him and he wanted Abraham to send a messenger to alert them, but he was told his family and siblings should listen and obey those preaching the Good News lest they perish. This story becomes more interesting and more frightening when hearing of these two people living separate lives even after death.

Jesus articulates life after death with clear warning language that humans do not necessarily appreciate hearing. We naturally fantasize about hearing supportive, attractive, and appeasing language.

Some Bible scholars and some Christians believe Lazarus’ story is a fiction Jesus picked to tell a parable. Others take this story literally, while others are somewhere in-between. There are others who think this is a figurative story. However, others including myself believe this is a real story for the following reasons:

- Jesus used real names in the story;
- Jesus did not interpret the story as in many of his parables;
- He did not add a moral lesson at the end of the story as in most parables;
- Jesus leaves the story to speak for itself;
- This is the only story in the New Testament that clarifies the subject of heaven and hell;
- The story tells Christians with clarity that there are future rewards and punishments;

- This last part of the story is constantly debated by some liberal Christians because they do not want to hear about hell. (This sermon is not about heaven and hell. That is for another day!)

Is it no surprise that people of the same blood who share one ancestor can dislike each other so much that they have only enmity toward one another, and can actually enjoy their siblings' sufferings? These people related by blood—Lazarus and the rich man—share the same ancestor: Abraham. They are both Israelites living two different lifestyles, which Jesus is contrasting in the story. The estrangement between them is magnified by poverty and wealth. We often pay less attention to strangers and may not feel obligated to associate with them, but how far can one completely avoid the feelings of someone with shared genes? What happened to the magnetic genetic pull?

In this sermon we explore being stewards in our family of origin. We want to discover what it means being a “brother’s or sister’s keeper”. Jesus cared for this homeless man more than his “brother” who lived a lavish lifestyle. He explains lavishness as an evil that overrides the human virtues of love, kindness, dignity, and respect toward others. It is not the wealth that Jesus castigates but the outcome, the wrong use of wealth. There is no verse in the New Testament where Jesus says we should never have more than we can eat or use. The question Jesus deals with is our carelessness and stingy habits. The lavishness—expensive clothing, rich food which often goes to waste to become crumbs Lazarus feeds on—becomes a barrier, or gate, between these two children of Abraham.

What makes this person blind and senseless for Lazarus’ woes? Might it be Lazarus was lazy, stubborn, or personally unknown to this rich man? Why was Lazarus poor? Could it be that Lazarus was mentally disabled? Or he was born in poverty and was stuck in poverty? Whatever the cause of his poverty, it may not have isolated him or demanded he stayed away from others. We are certain he did not have an incurable illness because community norms did not allow people with incurable or contagious disease to be near healthy people. Lazarus is in ragged clothes and exhibits running sores due perhaps to the cold, lack of a balanced diet, or just plain filth. Jesus recognizes Lazarus situation and plan to make it better. can we do the same to Lazarus of our time? Jesus’ view of Lazarus presents a learning moment.

Jesus’ teachings support the Methodist theological and philosophical understanding of work ethics; it’s part of our mission. We believe in “working like we will never die, and loving God like we will die tomorrow”. This belief and teaching make Methodists excellent workers and business-minded people. I have no doubt most Methodists who follow the doctrine and dogma of Methodism regarding work ethics, have enough to live on and invest. We are what God admires in human life. We continue to invest in education, healthcare, and other community-oriented projects.

In this story and in all other stories about money, property, and ownership, Jesus encourages working hard and investing. Whereas Jesus is ever proud of our accumulated assets, he is also concerned about our budgets, and he sounds a warning on

extravagant living. He wants us to share our surplus with those Lazaruses who cannot even afford a meal a day! Sometimes we do not see our surplus because we fill our budgets with our needs. But when seriously viewed, these “needs” may turn out to be not critically needed!

Sometimes we may have the eerie feeling, “I am giving too much; I may run out of investments”. We also fear a health crisis may strike, wiping out our investments. There is also a concern about running out of assets before death, or wondering what we will leave to our children or grandchildren who almost always ask this question, “Grandma or Grandpa, when you die, will I get your car? Will I live in this house?” These are disturbing questions; they make us want to hold onto what we have against the needs of Lazarus. I posit that it is the future needs that bother us more than the need of the moment! Perhaps I may be wrong because people’s worldviews differ, yet it’s a point to consider because Jesus is all about our budget!

Today Jesus dares investigate our clothes closet. He is assessing how often we utilize what we have in clothing, shoes, ties, ring boxes, and jewelry boxes! Whereas Jesus may ask about these things we have invested in to beautify our bodies, he is also wondering when we look at ourselves in the mirror, should we also think about a Lazarus sitting by the roadside on a cold, nasty day, wearing torn clothes and leaking shoes. Beside him may be an old dirty bag, or just a paper bag with all his belongings. Who do we blame for Lazarus being in this spot and the way he appears? Jesus wants us to consider how we clothe and feed Lazarus, and even if we have a rescue plan—through activism?

Jesus is also getting into the food pantry to access how much we have stored for ourselves—and perhaps for others? So, Jesus is not only our guest at the table during meal hour as we ask him to bless the food, but he is also watching our bank accounts, stockholdings, even perhaps gold and silver investments. But he is also looking deep inside our food pantry. He wants to walk with us accessing every shelf and all the goods therein. He asks question about each can, box of snacks, bottle of oil, baking stuff, and food stock we have kept in case of an earthquake, natural catastrophe, or anything about to expire! I hope he will not want to check in our refrigerators asking, “When and why did you cook this or that food?” Looking us in the face, Jesus may boldly ask, “When are you going to eat this? I hope you will not toss it into the trash container because Lazarus is at your gate, and he is hungry!”

Today we are also reminded of the native American struggles to maintain their identity amidst the dominant culture. We hear the story of **Orange Shirt Day** and other atrocities. We may be most comfortable talking about “THEM versus US” than looking at our own families and recognizing the struggling Lazarus. We can debate about what happened then when that orange shirt was tossed into thin air and replaced with something else. It is important to ask, “What can I do now to rectify the situation?”

The people of past centuries had their own understanding of “THEY” vs “THEM and US”. Today we feel those actions were appalling and humiliating to “THEY”. But our concern ought to be “What can we do to this Lazarus they created?” Can we

provide clothes and food? I hope no one feels justified in blaming current people for the evils of their past ancestors. I would support someone asking me what I am doing to improve the situation of Lazarus. And Lazarus is not part of "THEM" only. Lazarus is in the family. Let us include him at the table, get him from under the table and share a meal instead of the crumbs or leftovers. Let us give out a cup of drink, in Jesus' name. Amen!