

“Good News, Bad News, Good News”  
Luke 16:19-31  
Sunday, September 25, 2016  
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

**Opening.**

I heard about a Sunday School teacher who told his class about the story of the rich man and Lazarus. He highlighted the good end of Lazarus and the bad end of the rich man. He pointed out how one man went to hell and the other man went to heaven. He also pointed out how rich one man was and how poor the other man was. After the teacher taught his lesson he said to the class, “Now which would you rather be, boys, the rich man or Lazarus?” One boy raised his hand and said, “Well, I'd like to be the rich man while I'm alive, and Lazarus when I'm dead.” (source: James Merritt)

Exactly. I'd like to be rich and comfortable in this life and go to heaven in the next. Wouldn't you?

Jesus provides a number of different insights with this parable; a number of issues to ponder. The first and most obvious is the issue of poverty.

**I. Poverty.**

Lazarus, the poor man in Jesus' story, ends up in heaven. This parable is clearly a message of comfort and hope for the poor. Lazarus, interestingly enough, is the only character in Jesus' parables who is named. Clearly, Jesus – and Luke, too – feels that the character of Lazarus is of central importance. He represents the crucial themes of money and possessions.

If we compare how Lazarus and the rich man are treated in life and in death, we find stark contrasts. The rich man wears expensive purple clothing and fine linen; Lazarus is covered with sores. The rich man feasts all day; Lazarus starves. The rich man lives in a “gated

community” (v. 20); he is blind to the very existence of Lazarus. Meanwhile, Lazarus sits outside the gate, scraping by on crumbs and trash from the rich man’s table. When the poor man dies, he doesn’t even receive a decent burial; the rich man dies and is buried. We can assume it is a lavish funeral affair.

After the two men die, their situations change dramatically. The story describes a common first century view of heaven and hell. The rich man, tormented and thirsty in hell, looks up to see Abraham “far away with Lazarus by his side.” He begs for water; Abraham explains that, even if they wanted to give him water, there is a great chasm separating heaven and hell; no one can cross that chasm.

We could view this chasm between heaven and hell as a continuation of the chasm between Lazarus and the rich man in this life. The rich man is unaware of Lazarus as a person. The rich man sees Lazarus as a person lacking in value, too inconsequential even to be noticed. Fast forward to the afterlife...the rich man still expects Lazarus to serve him. He begs Abraham to send Lazarus to hell with a cup of water for him. The rich man has learned nothing.

He is not in hell because he is rich; he is in hell because of his attitude. He views himself as superior to poor people like Lazarus. His sense of superiority stays with him, even after he dies. Even death doesn’t open his eyes; even banishment to hell does not wake him up. He is blind to the poor all around him; he is asleep to the needy.

We are blind and asleep in our present society, aren’t we? The panhandlers on the street, the commercials about hungry children in Africa, the annoying homeless people who bother our church; it’s easy to ignore them, to forget them, to see them without really seeing them.

It’s challenging, for sure. We have had our share of homeless folks who refuse the help we offer, who are mentally ill or oppositional, who even curse at us and misuse our facilities.

It's not easy. This parable Jesus tells is not easy. He uses the rich man's five brothers to represent our predicament – yours and mine. He numbers us among the five brothers who are still living. The rich man begs Abraham to warn them; Jesus warns us with this story. There is still time; we have the opportunity to open our eyes, to see the poor, to wake up to the needs of the hungry, the forgotten and the rejected, the vulnerable people among us.

There's a story about a father who knelt down to tuck his little boy into bed. It was time for prayers and hugs. The little boy began his childhood prayer which he had repeated so many times before: "Now I lay me down to sleep; I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." On this night, however, the words got mixed up and the child inadvertently spoke words of the greatest wisdom he would ever know. He prayed: "If I should wake before I die. . . ." Then he stopped in embarrassment and apologized, "Oh, Daddy, I got all mixed up." Wisely, his father responded, "Not at all, son; that is the first time that prayer was properly prayed. My deepest longing for you is that you may wake up before you die." (Lloyd Ogilvie, paraphrased by King Duncan)

## **II. Awareness.**

We've been talking about waking up as it relates to the poor. The rich man needs to open his eyes and see Lazarus as a person of equal worth and value. You and I, and the rich man's brothers, need to wake up before it's too late. We need to see the poor all around us; we need to stop looking down our noses at those who are "less than" in our estimation.

But the parable is about more than seeing the poor. It's about seeing all of life through kingdom eyes. It's about waking up to God's truth among us. It's about noticing all around us that Jesus sees things differently than the world sees things.

The world assesses value in terms of wealth, beauty, talent, intelligence, giftedness...in

general, success. Even the church can get pulled into this worldly approach, defining success in terms of numbers and beautiful buildings and beautiful people.

The story of Lazarus, the rich man and his brothers reminds us of the urgency of this life. We need to wake up now. We need to see the truth today. God's values are more important than the world's values.

In God's view, what's most important is the relationship between Lazarus and the rich man. Instead of ignoring Lazarus, or treating him like a servant, the rich man ought to see him and love him as God sees the rich man and loves the rich man. God loves Lazarus and the rich man equally. God wants Lazarus and the rich man to love each other as brothers. God wants you and me to love each other as brothers and sisters, to love everyone we meet as a person that God wants to bring into his kingdom of love.

In the ways of the world, we compare ourselves to others. There's a pecking order. We look up the ladder and we see people who are more attractive than we are, who have more money and a nicer home and a nicer car and nicer children than we do – at least on the surface! We see people who are smarter and more creative, more successful.

If we look below us on the ladder, we see people we can look down on; we feel better about ourselves, because at least we're smarter or more successful or prettier or more handsome than that schmuck!

Jesus tells a story in which the tables are turned. In the afterlife, the rich man learns too late that God doesn't value people based on their relative levels of wealth or poverty. God values people based on how they treat one another. We need to wake up; we need to treat each other better. Not just poor people, but they are definitely on the list. Not just our family and friends, but they are on the list, too. Not just our church family, but boy, we are certainly called

by Jesus to love our brothers and sisters in his church,...in his body the church.

Jesus calls us to wake up, see the world through kingdom eyes, and love others because God first loved us.

I like how Leonard Sweet says it: “The world's philosophy is a four-letter word: More. The church's theology is also a four-letter word, but it often means the opposite of ‘more’: Love. Will the church be a force and a forum for love?” Good question. Will we be a force and a forum for love? This question is at the heart of the parable of Lazarus and the rich man.

A number of years ago there was a television special about Mother Teresa. It depicted the grim human conditions that were a part of her daily life. It showed all the horror of the slums of Calcutta and her love for these destitute people. The producer interviewed her as she made her rounds in that dreadful place. Throughout the program commercials interrupted the flow of the discussion. Here is the sequence of the topics and commercials: lepers (bikinis for sale); mass starvation (designer jeans); agonizing poverty (fur coats); abandoned babies (ice cream sundaes) the dying (diamond watches). (Brett Blair)

I had a similar experience recently when Roy and I went to a show at the Pantages. After the play, a rich lady & her daughter were scurrying down the sidewalk in Hollywood to their car. They were commenting to each other disdainfully about sections of the West Side they avoid because of the unseemly nature of the area. What stunned me was the contrast between the musical we had just enjoyed and the attitude these two women expressed – distaste for the poor and the dirty. The musical is called “Newsies.” It’s about the Newsboy Strike of 1899... newsboys – children -- whose labor was being exploited. They organized a strike to fight for better working conditions. The Newsboy Strike of 1899.

I’m not sure I can accurately describe the shocking disconnect of overhearing this woman

and her young adult daughter, fresh out of watching a very moving story-told-in-song about the ravages of poverty – hurrying to their expensive car and making disparaging remarks about poor people on the West Side. On the West Side! First of all, the West Side of L. A. is wildly wealthy for the most part, with homeless folks wandering in the margins. So their experience of true poverty was severely limited. Secondly, to have completely missed the message of the play – that the poor won out against the rich, that justice prevailed – it exemplifies this blindness that overtakes us at times.

We live in our own little bubbles. We no longer see the hurt and the pain all around us. And again, it's not just poor people that I'm talking about. The Lazarus's of this world, the suffering people of this world, we can easily find them uncomfortable. People who are suffering are people who more easily respond to God's call; they more clearly see their need for Jesus and his saving grace, his healing power. Those of us who are drifting along in basically happy, healthy little lives have a lot to learn from suffering folks. The Lazarus's of this world are closer to heaven than we are.

### **Closing.**

Healing and salvation come when we wake up, when we begin to see the Lazarus's among us, when we change our uncaring attitudes, when we let go of our indifference to the suffering of others.

The salvation Jesus offers, the healing he brings, is both spiritual and physical. The vision of God's kingdom is for all people to be lifted out of poverty and physical suffering. The vision of God's kingdom is for all people to find forgiveness of sins and renewal of life.

There's an ancient story about a botanist who was studying the heather bell found in the highlands of Scotland. While looking through his microscope at this beautiful flower, he was

approached by a shepherd who asked what he was doing. Rather than trying to explain, the botanist invited the shepherd to peer through his microscope and observe for himself. When the shepherd saw the wonder of the flower, he exclaimed, “My God, and I have been tramping on them all my life!”

Is that the word of warning we need? Wake up! Pay attention! Look around you. You may be tramping on the heart of someone nearby. Who is the Lazarus at your gate? (source: King Duncan).

Amen.