

Sunday, September 25 – 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Preacher: Rev. Douglas J. Brouwer

Sermon Title: “The rich man and Lazarus”

Scripture Reading: Luke 16:19-31

(The second reading for Sunday will be Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16.)

Note: A word about Luke before the discussion questions... In Luke 16:19-31 we encounter the only character in any of Jesus' parables – think about this! – who is given a name. It's the name of the poor man, and he is called Lazarus. Luke tells us again and again – *immer wieder* – that Jesus' over-riding concern is for the poor and marginalized. From Mary's “Magnificat” in the opening chapter (remember how the rich are sent away empty, while the poor and lowly are lifted up) to Jesus' various words critical of the rich, Luke sets his theme unmistakably before us. But in this parable Luke puts all of it into one extraordinarily difficult package ... just by giving the poor man a name. The poor, Jesus tells us, are not faceless people with no stories. The poor are real people with names, identities, and a history. They are not statistics; they are human beings. We cannot understand this parable until we understand this context.

1. In some of Jesus' parables, we have to work hard to figure out what is happening. Not here. Jesus paints a contrasting picture – black and white. I could list them, but it might be helpful for you to do it yourself. What does Jesus say about the rich man (glorious details)? What does Jesus say about Lazarus (again such glorious details)? There is no subtlety in this picture, is there? What does that tell you about Jesus' intent here? It is easy for us – easier for some than for others – to ignore the poor today, but Jesus will have none of that. He pushes our noses into the wretchedness of the human condition.
2. Suffering the torments of the afterlife, the rich man pleads that someone will be sent back to warn others, specifically the rich man's brothers, presumably so that they do not suffer the same fate he did. This brings to mind old Ebenezer Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*. Unlike the rich man in the parable, Scrooge gets another chance to do things differently. What is the response to the rich man's plea? Abraham says, “They've got the Bible, and it's all there. If they don't listen to the living voices of Scripture, neither will they listen to a dead man like Lazarus who will say exactly the same things.” Now take a moment to reflect on that. Are you surprised by Jesus' tone here?
3. In addition to the theme in Luke about God's concern for the poor, there is another unmistakable (and troubling) theme – namely, a reversal of fortune in the life after this. The theme is already present in Luke 1, but it is emphasized here. The rich and the poor will change places in the life to come. I don't know how much you've thought about this, but when I allow myself to consider the implications, I find that I am convicted. Those of us who live in the west – Europe and North America – have (and consume!) the vast majority of the world's wealth and resources. Like you, I was born into this situation (just as the poor in many parts of the world are born into theirs), but what are we supposed to do with what we have been given?
4. Vs. 22 – “Abraham's bosom” – an interesting term that deserves to be explored! According to scholars, this term is unknown in pre-Christian Jewish literature. It is used extensively later, but not before. It is possible that the term originates with this parable. First century Jews did not write or speculate much about the afterlife, but the idea of an afterlife was not unknown. The term Jesus uses here refers to a place of honor, rest, and bliss. “Bosom” is sometimes used to describe a place of honor at a banquet. Remember, for example, that the beloved disciple rested at Jesus' bosom at the last supper. What does Jesus want us to know by using this term – and introducing it here?

5. Journalist Sonia Nazario has written a gripping book about poverty in Mexico and Honduras. Wealth and poverty in those places is staggering in its extremes – and staggering too in what that poverty drives people to do in order to survive from one day to the next. In vs. 21 we read that Lazarus would gladly have eaten the scraps from the rich man’s table, and as it turns out this longing continues in many parts of the world today. Here is Sonia Nazario’s description about how the children in Honduras are forced to survive (Warning! This is difficult to read):

“[Children] as young as six and seven . . . have to root through the waste in order to eat. Truck after truck rumbles onto the hilltop. Dozens of adults and children fight for position. Each truck dumps its load. Feverishly, the scavengers reach up into the sliding ooze to pluck out bits of plastic, wood, and tin. The trash squishes beneath their feet, moistened by loads from hospitals, full of blood and placentas. Occasionally a child, with hands blackened by garbage, picks up a piece of stale bread and eats it. As the youngsters sort through the stinking stew, black buzzards soar in a dark, swirling cloud and defecate on the people below.” (*Enrique’s Journey*, Random House 2007, p. 26).

What does Jesus say to us in a world where this is the daily life of millions?