

I have heard more than once about the Lenten feasts that used to take place at Zion prior to COVID. They were huge feasts and brought people in from far and wide. I want to tell you a story about a different Lenten dinner.

One year several decades ago St. Marks Lutheran Church in Kitchener was doing a Lenten study. Prior to the study each week a small meal of soup and sandwiches were given to all in attendance. A few people who were not regular worship attenders came for dinner. The couple brought themselves and their three children. The father had recently been laid off and they were finding it hard to make their food budget go far. Each week they came it was delightful to see them. Then on the last week of Lent as they were leaving the church they said, "See you next week."

The congregation discussed the family's expectation that there would be a meal the following week. It was agreed before everyone left that they could not let that family down. Next week there was soup and sandwiches. There was the young family. There was love and laughter. There was inclusion and acceptance. Much like Lazarus they were encouraged to enter past the gate of despair into a life of hope and community.

This experience eventually led the people of St. Mark's to partner with Calvary United Church to expand this ministry. The outside community soon found out about the ministry. Smiles shining bright, individuals came for a meal and to their family of friends every Wednesday night. Some began to help in any way they could, cleaning, doing dishes, setting

up and taking down tables, sweeping the floor. It was a true community. The ministry became so large that St. Marks and Calvary called a pastor together for this outreach ministry.

The gospel reading today introduces us to two people: Lazarus and the Rich man. I noticed a few differences in the men. Lazarus was poor and unhealthy and looking for crumbs to eat. The rich man was wealthy and ate heartily at each meal. Lazarus was full of sores which were tenderly cared for by dogs. The rich man was likely nourished and very healthy. Lazarus sat outside the gates of despair and the rich man did not.

When both men died, the wealth in death changed. Lazarus was brought to heaven by angels to be with Abraham. He did not ask to be chosen but was indeed, and he experienced great joy. Lazarus continued to ask for nothing. The rich man was sent to Hades or hell. He begged for mercy. The rich man begged for God to call Lazarus, who was lower in status to come and help him. Then he asked for the Lord to save his brothers. Questions and demands. The Lord had other plans of agony for the rich man.

There was a great chasm drawn between the rich man in Hades to the heavens of Abraham. One that could not be eliminated.

The scripture that comes to mind in reflection of this story is those who are first shall be last and those that are last shall be first. The story of Lazarus and the rich man though is much deeper than that.

There is a little bit of Lazarus in all of us. We have all sat at different times in our lives outside the gates of pain and hurt. We have all at some point been speechless in knowing what our needs are and knowing how to pray. We have all felt the burdens, sores and wounds of life. I believe as people reach the golden years it sometimes feels like the years aren't so golden anymore. There are a lot of struggles. Whether young or old, whether a scraped knee, emotional scars or a bad back, we all carry a bit of Lazarus with us.

I have always wondered what was going through Lazarus' mind in this parable. He didn't speak. He sat in isolation. People walked by and I bet they wouldn't have paid much attention to him. Did he pray?

The great chasm in our lives is often that we do not talk to God. It isn't always easy to pray but conversations with God help to reduce the chasm of wrongs and broken relationships with God.

I don't want to ignore the rich man in this story. The rich man would not be quiet! He did not share. Some would say he deserved what he got. Abraham must have thought his crime of ignoring the poor and hurting was severe enough to abolish him to hell. The rich man wanted out so badly.

When looking at Lazarus and the rich man what has become apparent to me is this: God has chosen to claim us, sores and all. He doesn't care how wealthy we are (there is always someone wealthier than us). He doesn't care when we last showered or the clothes we wear. All God desires is to accept us as we are. He breaks down the walls of exclusion. He opens the gates to hope and thanksgiving. In baptism we are claimed. At the table we gather as family.

No one eats the crumbs. God brings us together as a Christian family. Remember God also brings the lonely to their place of acceptance. Maybe it is here or perhaps it is somewhere else. Food has a way of connecting people.

God claims us in baptism. God transforms. Like the people of St. Marks and Calvary United we cannot ignore needs. The Lazarus's of our world need friends. They need help getting through that gate of despair to the place of love. They need to be seen. Be bold and look. Be courageous and invite all to experience God's love. Be inclusive and welcome all to the family of God. Amen.