**March 31, 2019**

**Luke 16:19-31**

This parable is a study in contrasts. There was a very rich man who lived in a big house surrounded by fences and gates designed to let the right people in, and keep the wrong people out. The rich man wore royal purple clothes – an even stronger indicator of his high status, because the Roman government regulated who could wear that color. The rich man lived in luxury; he feasted like there was no tomorrow… **Every. Single. Day.** Jesus did not describe the man’s faith or other behaviors; he painted an opulent scene that ignored the life just outside his gate.

Sitting there was Lazarus. The poor man was covered in sores and hungry. Terribly hungry. He waited **Every. Single. Day.** for some kind of crumb to come his way. Surely some crumbs would find their way off the banquet table and into his hungry belly. No one helped him. No one seemed to notice him. Only the dogs in the street paid Lazarus any attention. They came and licked his wounds, aligning Lazarus with the “dogs under the table;” he was an unclean man whom others wouldn’t want to touch.

The rich man died and was buried – another sign of his high status. The poor man, Lazarus, died and was carried off by angels. The rich man went to Hades to be tortured. The poor man went directly into the prophet Abraham’s eternal company.

And between these contradictory lives was a wall. First, there was a wall around the rich man’s property, against which the poor man Lazarus leaned. Then after the men died, that wall became a chasm. A great, deep, impassable chasm. This time, though, Lazarus was comfortable on one side, while the rich man begged for relief on the other side. In life, the rich man was glad for the things that separated him from the common world. In death, however, the rich man was grieved by the space that prevented him from being close to – even touching – Lazarus. The wall that protected his wealth and status and comfort became the very thing that prevented his status and comfort.

To those who say, “Good fences make good neighbors,” Robert Frost poetically responded, “Before I built a wall I’d ask to know what I was walling in or walling out.” [[1]](#footnote-1)

People love walls. We love dividing lines. We like knowing where one property line begins and another ends, and who belongs with whom. But we also like to know where metaphorical lines are. When you meet someone in the South, they literally ask “Who are your people? Are you Pat’s daughter or Butch’s? What church do you go to?” Sometimes they ask what college team you cheer for. Those simple answers tell you who someone’s people are, which tells you about their history and likely values. These answers tell you where the lines are, so you know not to talk about the other part of the family, or not to talk about that team’s mistakes.

You know and I know that Jesus didn’t care who someone’s people were. He didn’t care about the team they supported. Jesus was all about breaking *down* walls, whereas the scribes and Pharisees tried to maintain the walls. The officials wanted everything to be done by the right people at the right time in the right way. Decently and in order. Staying inside the lines. But Jesus didn’t care about that. As Barbara Brown Taylor recently wrote, “The only clear line I draw these days is this: when my religion tries to come between me and my neighbor, I will choose my neighbor… Jesus never commanded me to love my religion.” If someone was hungry, they should be fed. If someone was dirty or religiously unclean, they still deserved love and attention. If someone was a stranger, they deserved to be welcomed. Women and men, children and adults, Jew and Gentile, friend and stranger, Jesus unapologetically broke down every wall between these groups.

Jesus wasn’t breaking down the walls to have a Communist utopian society. He unapologetically worked for the poor and downtrodden and everyone on the less desirable side of the wall. Do you remember the beatitudes we read in Luke a few months ago? Jesus said, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God… But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation… Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled… But woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry… Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh… but woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep…” Jesus drew our attention to the walls we build between one another, and the ways that will affect our life with God. Eugene Peterson said, “There’s trouble ahead if you aren’t paying attention.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Jesus said then to his followers, “Give, and it will be given to you… A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will the measure you get back.” [[3]](#footnote-3) What you give, the ways that you share your blessings -- or what you don’t give -- it will all come back to you. Not that it’s about you, *per se*, but the people with whom you could be sharing and blessing with your blessings. God is looking out for you, but God is especially looking out for the poor, the hungry, the grieving, the needy. God continually looks to “lift up the lowly” (as Mary sang in this same Gospel).

The rich man managed to pass Lazarus every single day while remaining completely indifferent to what he saw. He accepted Lazarus as part of the scenery outside his home – something he had to step over or walk around – like a concrete planter or a tree growing in an inconvenient spot. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. preached fifty years ago in Montreat, North Carolina that the rich man “went to hell not because he was rich, but because he passed by Lazarus every day and never really saw him. . . . He allowed Lazarus to become invisible.” [[4]](#footnote-4) The rich man didn’t give as it had been given to him; he was getting back a “good measure” of exactly what he gave – nothing. The rich man ignored the places in scripture calling him to feed the hungry and clothe the naked. The rich man didn’t notice that Lazarus was stranger or neighbor or even a human being – someone who had been created in God’s image as much as he had, with the same love as he had. The rich man did nothave a deep biblical faith that commanded him to see and to respond to that man outside his gate as his brother, instead of just part of the scenery.

We belong to a faith tradition that explicitly ties us with each other as children of a living God, brothers and sisters in Christ. Again, Dr. King preached: “For some reason, I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the way God made the world. . . . We must all learn to live together as brothers and sisters or we will all perish as fools.” [[5]](#footnote-5)

The rich man was perishing because of his foolishness. He was desperate for a drop of water to relieve his burning tongue. Parched for the water of life. Desperate for a taste of mercy.

We believe that God offers this mercy in the sacrament of baptism. We believe that these simple drops of water wash over us, bringing life eternal to those in its path. We believe that if someone is baptized, but goes on to live a life of sin, seemingly separate from Christ and the church, God’s mercy is unfailing. We believe that once these baptismal waters have flowed over someone, they can never be removed or dried; once you are wet, you are always sopping wet. So the mercy that the rich man sought – that single drop of water on his tongue – has just been given to Carter. It was poured over Kivrin a few weeks ago. It has showered upon many heads sitting in the room. Baptism is something that unites Christians together – rich and poor, men and women, young and old. Baptism reminds us that we are part of the same people – the same family – bound to love and care for one another as God cares for us individually.

Our call then is to live a life according to the richness of God’s grace given. Our call is to love God and love our neighbor. To share the good news and extend the mercy given. May we be bold to share our abundance, reaching out to everyone sitting outside our gate. Amen.

1. Mending Wall” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Peterson, Eugene. The Message. Luke 6:25. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Luke 6:20-25, 38 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Martin Luther King Jr., “The Church at the Forefront of Racial Progress” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Martin Luther King Jr., “The Church at the Forefront of Racial Progress” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)