

Rich Man, Poor Man

September 29, 2013

Shepherd's Grace Church

Luke 16:19-31

¹⁹“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. ²²The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.’ ²⁵But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. ²⁶Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’ ²⁷He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house—²⁸for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ ²⁹Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ ³⁰He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ ³¹He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’” (Read Also Jer. 32: 1-3, 6-15)

For the second week in a row, the Hebrew Bible Lesson leaves us with a sense of discomfort, disquiet and dis-ease! For the second week in a row we wonder about God's plan! Has God left us? Has God abandoned us? Is it even possible for God to abandon us? We shudder at the thought; yet we cannot help but notice that His attitude seems less than gracious! At least at the end of this passage there seems to be some hope offered, some sense of future! Perhaps it is that future we would do well to pursue today!

We are no doubt alone in our sense of discomfort at hearing the words of Jeremiah. The Hebrew people were facing one of the most fierce foes in the history of military competence. At the time of the writing of this part of the *Book of Jeremiah*, the Babylonians were the barbarians at the gate! They were about to overrun Jerusalem. Eventually they would raid the temple, take the treasure, exile the leaders and leave the country defenseless, the women and children subject to rape and abuse; utterly without hope.

The only confidence the Hebrew people had was in the promise of the Lord who had led them out of slavery and bondage and into a life of freedom and prosperity. The problem was that the people of Israel had turned their backs on God. They had ignored his commands to care for the widowed and the orphaned. They ignored his commands to worship only him! Instead, they turned to the comforts of the world. They looked around at the other nations of the world and saw the opulence of their lifestyles. They saw the creature comforts others were surrounded with and they wanted, they coveted, they desired the easy life. They turned their back on the opportunities they had for fulfillment of God's eternal promise and they walked away from the disciplines required of them in order that they might know the succulent and savory taste of the poison fruit. Like Adam and Even in the garden, they had the opportunity to live in the fullness of God's presence (Gen. 1: 26-29) but also like Adam and Eve they chose the temptation of the world. (Gen. 3)

Today, we too know the promise of God for those who will keep His commands! He will never leave us, or forsake us, or abandon us; even when our times look most bleak! Today, we too look around at our world. We start by looking at our own congregation. We see here a beautiful place to worship. We see an opportunity to grow. We also see the struggle we have to pay our bills. We wonder if we will be able to commit to the discipline of our faith. We want to talk about how much to charge others to come and use our facilities in an attempt to raise revenue. We want to limit access to our building for fear it will be over used. We are tempted by the ways of the world to act like the world and we wonder if we can resist the temptation!

We look at our community. We see our leaders resisting new growth and new business because existing business are fearful that they will have to bear too much of the tax burden. We see the poor at the door and the homeless in the streets. We hear of the abuse in our homes and we wonder if our town will be able to survive the violence that seems to be growing. We do not know where to turn and we have long since moved away from the power of prayer to accomplish anything. We don't pray in schools, we don't pray in meetings, we don't pray in our homes. We don't pray!

We look at our state. We see a state that has the second lowest spending per student on public education in the United States. We see a place that exports business opportunities because business is not willing to pay more to workers. We see a place where workers make unrealistic demands on management and refuses to compromise in times of negotiation! We see a place where the temptations of the world for greater personal wealth take priority over the requirement of God that we care for the orphaned and the widowed!

We look at our nation and we see a government facing shutdown because the system of government we treasure has broken down. We see men and women unwilling to talk, unwilling to compromise, unwilling to settle for anything less than 100% of what they want. We see men and women acting like children who, when they don't get their way, take their toys and go home!

WHERE DO WE FIND HOPE?

Again I invite you to focus on the last part of the passage from Jeremiah! Once again, the Lord promises, deeds will be recorded, property will be bought and sold, people will be free, and the will of the Lord will be accomplished in this land! How will this be accomplished? How can God's will possibly be seen in the absolute desolation of our situation? I believe this is accomplished in the reality of the rest of the story. We know the outcome of the exile. We know the outcome of the desecration of the first temple. We know the outcome of the pillage and the plunder!

What we know, however, does not always match with what we do! What we know means we have to be disciplined! What we know means we have to be diligent. What we know means we have to be patient! The people of Israel were none of these things. They did not turn from their evil! They did not turn from their ignorance. They continued to ignore the starving, the suffering, the alienated and the abandoned! What will we do?

In 1994, my first wife was diagnosed with dementia. Dementia is a disease that promotes memory loss due to increasing plaque on the brain. One form of dementia is Alzheimer's disease. This disease causes short term memory loss and a dramatic change in personality. Not all people who have dementia have Alzheimer's but all people who have Alzheimer's suffer dementia. We are fortunate that Diane suffers from dementia. As my wife's case progressed, and before I knew what was happening, she used the lifetime benefit of our health care coverage. Our insurance policy was cancelled and because of her pre-existing condition we were unable to get additional coverage. The only option I could find to provide for her care was divorce and subsequent qualification for her as disabled, allowing her to receive medicare benefits through social security!

Probably mostly because of my own situation, I support universal health care and the provisions that are currently part of the affordable care act that provide that no person can be excluded from health care coverage because of a pre-existing condition. I further support universal health care because I believe it is a fundamental right of all people to have care when they are sick. I know from many situations in our congregation that many, through no fault of their own are able to afford health care coverage at its current cost. I believe we all have a responsibility that God charges us with in Isaiah 1 to provide for the widows, the orphans and the poor.

While I do not agree with all that is included in Obamacare, I see that we as a church and we as the church have not stepped up to our Christian obligation. The affordable health care act is a way we can own our responsibility to those who are less fortunate than we. As I read scripture and as I read the passage from Jeremiah for this morning, if we are to return from exile, if we are to once again exercise the fullness of the liberties promised by God, we must accept our responsibility. As a nation, we claim

certain inalienable rights; the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. We claim these rights for all people and we as the people of God must affirm them and argue for them for all people!

In 1997, I felt hopeless as I made final decisions regarding my wife's health care. I could not imagine what my life could look like in the future. I could not imagine the strain on my daughters. I could not imagine how we could ever overcome that feeling. Then, slowly, excruciatingly painfully, I began to walk as a person in exile. My daughters began to walk as people in exile! We were alienated, abandoned to a new future that seemed empty and askew, out of line, not quite right. We couldn't see right. We couldn't see future. Much like the Hebrew people exiled to a far away land, we felt disconnected.

I know many of you who have experienced similar circumstances are aware of this feeling. I know many of you have experienced a hopelessness that none of the rest of us can possibly imagine. It is from this hopelessness that God calls us this morning. He says in Jeremiah 32 that one day, property will be bought and sold again, deeds will be exchanged, business will be back to normal and God, who never leaves or forsakes us will restore the fullness of His promise! There will be LIFE! There will be hope! There will be a future!

In 2006 that future started to become a reality for me. Somewhat ironically, I was in Israel and I was texting a few people pictures of my trip there. One of those people was Rochelle Brown. During our correspondence, I sensed an openness that I had not known before. I started to text her more than the others and to engage her in longer conversations. By the time I returned from Israel I knew I wanted to ask her out. By the end of the month of April, we were dating and by the first of October we were married. I could never have imagined that God would lead me back out of exile in such a special way! My love for my first wife is real, but my future is more than I might ever have imagined.

The future I have with Rochelle started 7 years ago and those of you who have been in marriage counseling with me know I have a few strategies for successful marriage. The first is what I call the 55% solution. In athletics, coaches encourage players to give 110%. You and I know that is impossible. 100% is all anyone has and we can never really give more than we have. Coaches just want us to dig deeper. In marriage, I believe the way we dig deeper is by meeting each other more than half-way. If you and your marriage partner will give 55%, just a little more than half, every day of your marriage, the overlap, the existing 10% will become the strength, the unity that will sustain you in every situation.

One way I try to encourage newly weds to apply this principle is by trying to cause their spouse to fall in love with them each day of their life. I suggest that they find some little way to say, "I Love You and I'd marry you all over again," to their spouse each and every day. I do try to practice what I preach. Each morning, I get up and make Rochelle's coffee for her. I make it exactly the way she taught me and I try to have it ready for her as she walks out the door. She thinks I do this because she taught me. The reality is I learned this long ago.

My dad made coffee for my mom every day I can remember from the time I was a young child! When I was very young, I watched as he put the grounds right into the pot. Later coffee makers and filters were available and I watched as my dad carefully prepared my mom's cup of coffee for her. He brought it to her with a smile and a kiss...and here's the really telling point; My dad never drank a cup of coffee in his life! He disliked the taste, the smell, the feeling of the caffeine. He made the coffee just for mom! He made the coffee because he loved her and for over 60 years now, he and my mom have been a couple...not just because of the coffee, but because of the effort!

In the passage from Jeremiah, God is disappointed with the effort! The people have failed to try to live into his commands. They have ignored the poor, the widowed, the orphaned! They have ignored God. They have not invited God to fall in love with them again each and every day but God does not and will not give up on His promise! God created them, creates us to be in relationship with Him; to acknowledge Him; to worship Him! I believe that is exactly where we meet the rich man and Lazarus this morning in Luke's gospel.

Once again this week I wish you could be looking in a mirror as you read or hear the passage from Luke. I believe Jesus has each one of us in mind as he tells the story. I believe there is a message from both the rich man and the poor man for each one of us! I invite you to re-read the passage now before you read further! In what ways do you hear yourself being like the rich man? In what ways do you hear yourself being like Lazarus. Let me expand the parable for you so you can gain a larger perspective. Let me tell you the story just from the perspective of Dives, the rich man.

Good morning. My name is Dives. I am a Roman! That should be obvious to you by my purple garment. Purple is our color. Perhaps you thought we were from Kansas State but no! Theirs is the wrong purple. Ours is the only correct color and we wear it with great pride because we know others, those who are less than Roman could never afford it!

I was raised in Rome. My father was very wealthy. My five brothers and I never lacked for anything. We believed in the power of the Roman gods and we supported all the right temples. We stayed on the politically correct side of the Roman rulers. When it came time for me to choose how best to serve the empire, I did not hesitate to choose the military. My father's wealth and reputation earned me the immediate rank of centurion. I was in command of 100 soldiers.

After several successful campaigns, we were eventually assigned to the very difficult task of keeping order in Israel. The Hebrew people were a very difficult people to conquer. They believed in only one God, one creator of the universe and that this God had chosen them to be His special ambassadors to the world. Their faith in this one true God made them extremely resistant to giving allegiance to a Roman emperor who claimed to be a god himself.

I befriended a group of these Hebrew people called the Pharisees. They were part of the religious elite in Israel. They did not like Roman rule but they were politically savvy enough to recognize our superior power and strength. I learned from them that their God had given them the law and the law they obeyed was their salvation. They thought all they had to do was make sure they lived in an upright way. They did not seem to have a real sense of understanding for other people. They thought the poor of their country were poor because they did not obey the commands of God. They believed the blessings of wealth and prosperity were God's blessings for keeping God's law!

As a citizen of Rome, I believed in a like way. We had always been taught that we as Romans were superior just because of our birth as Romans and that others were inferior to us because the gods of Rome did not favor them. I believed that I was entitled to riches and wealth because I had always known riches and wealth and the wealth must be because of a certain divine favor.

One day, in a place called Nazareth, I was standing post outside a synagogue. A man, one of the men who had been raised there, stood up to read from their book of sayings. He opened a scroll they gave him and he read, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4: 18-19) I was filled with contempt for the man. Imagine a person proclaiming favor, and God's favor at that, for the poor, the crippled, the blind and the deaf!

Others from the town must have felt the same way. They rebelled against his message and drove him to the edge of town where they were prepared to throw him off a cliff to his certain death. Somehow he escaped them and went on his way. Our paths crossed again as I was later in Capernaum and in Jerusalem where he encouraged others to "Take up their cross and follow him!" and where he said, "You fool, this night your life will be required of you. Now what will become of all your treasure." Years later, after I had retired I heard this man was finally captured. He was convicted by his own people and was turned over to the Romans for execution. I did not bother to go to his execution even though I was close to Jerusalem and would have been welcome. I did hear some strange stories from other centurions regarding his death however!

He apparently said, "Father forgive them," as his last words on the cross and he died only a few hours after he was nailed there. On Sunday morning, I heard that his friends could not find his body and there was talk of him being raised from the dead. My Roman sources never confirmed this, but rumors persisted for years after!

As I said, I had retired long before these events and because of the wealth I had accumulated from my father and the pension provided by the Romans I was able to retire in extreme comfort. I moved my five brothers in to my home with me and we enjoyed fine foods and a feast every day. We lived inside a

gated home with servants at our beck and call. We never had to leave the grounds and were largely undisturbed by the outside world. The only distraction I could ever complain of was the incessant noise of dogs barking and baying outside the gate daily. I frequently ordered the servants to get rid of them and the sound would abate for awhile but then they were back again. They annoyed me until the day I died!

That's right, I said I died! Funny thing, as a Roman I never really believed in a heaven or a hell but the instant I died I felt a consciousness. I was aware that I was somewhere. Over time while I was in Israel I learned some of the Hebrew scripture. I knew the people were called children of Abraham who was promised by God that he would be the father of many nations. As my consciousness increased I realized I was in agony. It was like I was in a fire but was not consumed. There was no comfort, no relief; only a total absence of everything except the torment. From my agony, I looked up and far off in the distance I could see someone. It took a long time but eventually I figured out that the Hebrew people did have the answers to eternity.

I called out to their father. Abraham I said! He answered and I begged him for relief. He pointed to the man whom he was comforting, the man who was seated next to him. He asked, "do you remember this man?" I told him, I have never seen the man before. Father Abraham said that the man had lain outside my gate for years. He said the dogs who barked were barking as they licked the sores of the man. All the dogs wanted, all the man wanted was comfort and sustenance. He said they would have eaten only the scraps from my table if only I would have noticed them.

I tried to explain to Abraham that I did not know but he asked me about the man whom I had heard at the synagogue. He said, "did you not hear him proclaim God's desire for the care of the poor and the sick." I admitted I had and he reminded me that I should have paid more attention. He said the lessons I had heard about taking up the cross were intended as further instruction. He said the cross the man was talking about was a symbol of love. He said that in that world, we were to bear the burdens of others as an expression of our love for them. He said the cross the man died on was the fullest expression of that love that has ever been offered. He said I should have listened, but because I had not listened in that life, I would not have the opportunity to be present with him in eternity.

My loneliness increased and I realized it was eternal as I heard him say that a great chasm had opened between where he was and where I was. He said the man, Lazarus was his name, had received many hardships in his life in the world while I had received many benefits. Now we were separated because I did not share from my abundance! I had so much and I gave so little. How could I have been so blind!

I made one last appeal to Abraham. I asked him to at least send Lazarus to my brothers so they did not wind up in this hell I was experiencing. I was still used to giving orders and it surprised me when Abraham said no. I was not used to hearing others tell me no! I was still thinking I was the center of the

universe, but Abraham told me that my brothers had Moses and the prophets to guide them. I said they would not listen to Moses or the prophets but they would listen to one who had been raised from the dead!

Then, from behind Abraham I saw the face the man I had heard so many years earlier. I saw the face of Jesus and I heard Abraham say to me, "the chasm that has been opened was opened by you. God does not want to keep anyone from Himself but when we fail to care for the poor, the widowed, the orphaned (Isaiah 1) we turn our backs on God." Abraham said, "if they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not listen even if someone is raised from the dead!" In despair, I turned away realizing my judgment was just and hoping that something would move my brothers to avoid this place!

WHERE DO WE FIND HOPE?

The great chasm does not have to be opened in our lives. We have the word of God to encourage us and guide us! In the Word there is promise! That promise is that once again we will live in the fullness of God's intention for us! Once again we will buy and sell and trade honestly! Once again we will recognize the fullness of God's love! We recognize that fullness as we recognize that all people are of incredible worth. All ministry is God's ministry.

There is no one person in the church more important than another! There is no ministry more important than another! There is no greater gift we have than to take up the gift of the cross and follow Jesus. When we do this we, the blind will see, we the lame will walk, we the poor will be cared for and hear the good news! We the people will be His and He will be our God! Amen!