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Luke 16: 19-31
October 20, 2013

Jesus, you said that the poor would be with us always, and they are here-women and children, young and old, some displaced suddenly, others who slid into the abyss that hides them from overly-genteel hearts. The poor are among us. Hungry and thirsty, in need of a doctor and a bath, desperation in a land of plenty, ragged and shoeless but criticized for not pulling themselves up by their bootstraps. Wake us to their humanity, O God, and shift our eyes from "us" and "mine" to those who are Thine. Amen.¹

"How Far Can A Dollar Stretch?"

Could you eat on \$4.50 a day?

I want you to think about that this morning. \$4.50 a day. Consider the math and what that might mean for you and your household.

That's slightly less than a tall pumpkin spice latte at Starbucks.

\$4.50 a day.

I ask if you could eat on \$4.50 a day because that's the average daily SNAP benefit for a person on food stamps.

(\$4.50 a day.)

I don't think there's room in that budget for a latte at Starbucks. Do you? If you're a frequent customer at Starbucks, think about that the next time you're waiting in line for your coffee.

Last week at the CROP Walk, the 10 of us who were there learned that Missouri ranks number 1 in the nation in food insecurity. That's according to the US Department of Agriculture.

Nearly 1 in 6 Missourians are food insecure.

That means that at least once in the past year, they skipped meals because they didn't have enough food.

This past summer, the US House of Representatives passed, for the 1st time since 1973, a Farm Bill that didn't include funding for SNAP, or food stamps.

And then again in September, Congress voted to cut \$40 million from the SNAP budget. Some legislators said they voted for the cuts because the new program would actually give people a hand, as in it would force those people who don't need SNAP to go find a job. As one legislator said, "Work is not a penalty. Work is a blessing." He was citing the book of Genesis when he said that. Another legislator from TN also cited the Bible when urging Congress to cut the food program: citing the Book of Thessalonians he said: "The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat."

Broadway Presbyterian Church in New York City had something to say about that. On the church sign, someone posted the message: "Dear Mr. Speaker, Can you ask your friends to read Luke 16:19-31? We will. It's about caring for the poor. There seems to be some confusion. Thanks. Join us Sunday at 11 am."

The contrasts and disparities between the rich and the poor so vividly described in Luke 16 **are meant** to evoke an equally vivid reaction. Luke clearly tells us that the parable was given to "lovers of money", so it was a direct message to them. Apparently, Jesus wanted to reveal through this story that those lovers of money loved their money more than people, their possessions more than the poor, their clothes more than compassion, and their extravagant feasts more than sharing food with the hungry.

And I'm going to guess that those "lovers of money" wouldn't have liked this parable because back in Jesus' day wealth was a sign of God's blessing, so it would have come as a great shock to them that the rich man in today's parable wound up in Hades. Hades, they must have thought. But God loves me so much to have blessed me with all this wealth! It can't possibly be, they must have said. There must be some mistake.

Ironically, they wouldn't have believed it any more than the rich man Jesus tries to warn them about. By the time the words hit home for him, it's too late. So he begs Jesus to send word to his stingy brothers about **their** eventual fate. But Jesus knows it won't do any good. They didn't listen to Moses or the prophets, why would they bother listening to someone who rises from the dead?

Ironically, the same thing could be said about all of us. We, too, have been warned. But will we believe the One who rose from the dead who dared speak of a new economy? Or will we leave here today having been made just uncomfortable enough by the preacher that it gets under our nerves when go to buy that next latte, but we buy it anyways and throw up our hands in despair. After all, doesn't the Bible also say that the poor will always be with us?

There are two worlds at work in today's parable. There's the earthly world and the one that awaits us, and there is the world of the haves and the have-nots. There are strict boundaries in these worlds, so much so that they are impossible to cross. Lazarus the poor man can't cross the gate into the rich man's world, and the rich man can't cross the boundary into heaven after his death.

These two worlds never cross. The rich man sits in his home in his gated community and feasts on his decadent food while Lazarus sits at his gate while the dogs lick his sores. A very important point in this parable is that the rich man is completely oblivious to Lazarus. He doesn't see him! He has no idea he even exists!

Until he winds up in Hades. Then he sees Lazarus in the bosom of Abraham. It's an interesting choice of words that Luke uses, because children rest in their mother's bosom and there they are fed, kept safe and warm, an experience that Lazarus never had in his earthly life.

From Hades the rich man looks up to see Lazarus and says, "Father Abraham, please have pity on me and send Lazarus to put his cool finger on my hot tongue." Even in Hades, the rich man thinks he's still in charge.

In reply to the rich man's request Abraham says, "Child, you had so many comforts in your life, now Lazarus is enjoying those comforts here, and you are in agony."

So he makes a second request of Abraham, "Send Lazarus to my brothers, so they don't suffer the same fate." But Abraham replies, "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them." But the rich man, in his third and final request, says, "They'll repent if a dead man goes to them." But Abraham says back, "If your brothers won't listen to Moses and the prophets, why would they listen to a dead man?"

This story is about many things. It's a story about how riches cannot save us. It's a story about what happens to us if we ignore the plight of the poor.

But at its core, I think this is a story about how we're supposed to follow Christ. There's a running commentary in Luke that if one wants to be Christian, one needs to walk the walk and talk the talk and, yes, put one's money where one's mouth is.

I think this is an important lesson for us to hear, because there is still a great chasm that exists between rich and poor, and it still needs to be fixed. While the stock market has soared, the gap between the haves and have-nots has widened considerably, and is at its widest since the Great Depression. The income of the top 1% has grown by 20%, while the income of everyone else has only grown by 1%. Between 2009-2012, 95% of the economic gains have gone to the richest 1%.

But the problem with the rich man wasn't that he was rich, the problem was that he didn't care if Lazarus was poor. So while he was feasting away on his decadent food, unconcerned about Lazarus starving at his gate, the great chasm grew wider and wider. His wealth insulated him from the needs of others, so much so that he no longer saw "the others". He'd gotten very adept at keeping Lazarus' suffering at arm's length. And for that crime, he wound up in Hades where he was more than an arm's length away from the "good life" he once led.

I think this is an important lesson for us to hear, because in this city where what matters is where one went to high school and therefore where you live, it's easy to keep suffering at an arm's distance. We have many gated communities in St. Louis that keep "the other" out, and in this wealthy community it's very easy to keep suffering at an arm's distance.

But this parable is a call to action. It's a call to all of us and to all churches to step out of our places of privilege, to look into the eyes of the hungry and homeless, to see them as a child of God, and then to help them. Because it's not enough to just feel empathy; our Christian faith requires us to do something, too-like reorient how we spend our money so that the Lazarus' of the world do not have to sit and beg at the rich man's gate.

John Buchanan once said that, "Christian faith is a moral compass, and it takes moral courage to consult it and not ignore it. Christian faith mandates moral courage to see injustice and name it. There will always be resistance to that, because it leads to changed behavior and changed personal priorities and changed spending habits."

He then went on to say, "If I am hungry, that is a physical problem; if my neighbor is hungry, that is a spiritual problem." (As told by John Buchanan, "The Economics of Faith")

I once heard someone say at a stewardship conference that the essential characteristic of a Christian is generosity. The essential characteristic of a Christian is generosity. When I first heard that I thought, "Hmm." The wheels started turning in my head, because such broad statements usually give me pause. But the more I thought about it, I realized, that's true. Generosity is the most important characteristic. Because generosity assumes that one is also compassionate, or loving, or kind, or caring or all those other adjectives we think of when we think of a Christian. But you can't really be kind, or compassionate or loving without being generous.

And this is why, I think, Jesus talked about money more than anything else, because Jesus knew that at the heart of all those other characteristics, there has got to be a generous person.

Three years ago when I preached on this passage I gave you all \$1 bill. I asked you to go out and spend that dollar on a worthy cause and report back how you spent it. This time around, I'm not handing out any dollars because: 1: It's easy to spend someone else's money and 2: hopefully, you heard the words of warning from Father Abraham three years ago and changed your spending habits. If you didn't, it's not too late.

Because we can't go through life ignoring the needs of others and call ourselves a Christian, we can't go through life clinging tightly to our money and call ourselves a Christian, and we can't go through life and keep those in need at arm's length. Well, we could, but I don't want to suffer the same fate as Lazarus. Do you?

Amen.