

## You've Got to be Kidding Me!

[Text - Luke 16:19-31]

Pastor Dave Shackle  
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Throughout his entire ministry, Jesus challenges people to think about how they use - and regard - their money and resources. The Gospel writer, Luke, records Jesus saying more about the misuse of wealth, than any other topic. In this morning's New Testament reading, we hear one of Jesus' powerful and memorable stories on the subject.

"There was a rich man who dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. At his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger from the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table...." Both men die. The poor man goes to heaven in the arms of the angels. The rich man, who has callously ignored the poor man's needs, goes to hell in a *handcart!* The stern warning to the wealthy is crystal-clear: "Stop being so greedy and self-centered, and start taking care of the people who need your help, or *someday* God's gonna take care of you!" Unfortunately, however, this cautionary tale [and others like it] are easily ignored or dismissed by self-centered, narcissistic people - just like that rich man ignores and passes-over Lazarus lying right there in front of him. Fortunately, however, there are some details in Jesus' story that can inspire you and me - as the *relatively* rich of this world - to increase our efforts to help the poor, and to challenge those who are *ridiculously* rich, to do the same.

When the rich man asks Abraham to send Lazarus to "cool his tongue", or go back to warn his brothers to change their selfish ways, Abraham basically says, "You've got to be kidding me! There's no way in *he...heaven* that Lazarus is going to be denied the peace and comfort he has finally found, simply to pamper you,

or to indulge your greedy brothers! Every day, you completely ignored the Divine call for mercy and compassion - as your brothers continue to do. So let's be honest: if your brothers won't listen to the teachings of Moses and all the prophets, then even someone coming back from the dead won't change their minds or their hearts.

Jesus tells this story primarily for the benefit of those pseudo-religious "lovers of money" who claim to love the God of justice and compassion, yet show utter contempt for Jesus' genuine compassion for the poor and the oppressed. In their minds, these people are poor because they deserve it. They are seen as the disposable dregs of society - just like Lazarus is seen [or *not* seen] by the rich man who passes him every day. Strangely enough, even though Lazarus was virtually invisible to that rich man as he sat right outside his gate, he suddenly comes into sharp focus - far away in the heavens. And apparently, the rich man even knows the name of this insignificant individual who he has ignored throughout his life. But rather than ask Lazarus' forgiveness for his cruel insensitivity and inhumanity, the rich man continues to ignore him, and addresses Abraham. I believe *that* detail, and what he says to Abraham, is critically important in understanding this "great chasm" between heaven and hell - not as an after-life phenomenon, but as a present-life reality.

The rich man essentially says, 'Abraham! Look, I'm suffering here! I'm not used to being denied every comfort money can buy. So why don't you send Lazarus down here to help me? After all, he's just a poor beggar, who's already accustomed to suffering. It's not like he really belongs in that magnificent place....' In spite of everything, the rich man still doesn't really see this *person* named Lazarus. Like many other "lovers of money", he refuses to acknowledge the basic humanity of those less fortunate: "Why should *they* have health care coverage? They don't deserve it!"

Why should we welcome refugees here? They're not our problem!"

"Why should we say that *their* lives matter, when we know that *all* lives matter equally?" [Really? Do we truly know - and believe that?]

And thus, this "great chasm" is created and maintained between the "haves" and the "have-nots", the privileged and the underprivileged. That's also how *hell* is created - Hell on earth for people who could be fed and sustained by the crumbs that fall from the dinner tables, or the boardroom tables, of the absurdly rich.

Maybe the reason Jesus says so much about money and riches, equality and justice, is that he is striving to create *heaven* on earth - to bring-forth a Divine Realm in the here and now. And perhaps the reason Jesus lives and identifies so closely with the poor, the outcast and the oppressed, is to help us recognize their genuine humanity - *and* their Divinity; to truly understand that as we provide care and comfort for "the least of these, our brothers and sisters, we do it unto him!" Hopefully, recognizing this will help us to move beyond simply feeling guilty or powerless, and will inspire us to respond with authentic compassion and active caring.

Unfortunately, the rich man in today's story never gets it - but that's his story. Your story and mine, continue to unfold. And the more you and I allow those stories that Jesus tells, to sink-in and take-hold of our minds and hearts, the more *our* life stories will resemble Jesus' own:

A story of compassion and service, giving and grace;

A life which treasures the Divine child in each person;

A Redeemer, who truly sees and cares about *every* person he encounters, particularly the poorest of the poor;

One who calls you and me to help redeem this broken and hurting world - by comforting the afflicted, and sometimes, by afflicting to comfortably rich!