



"The Gap"

Scripture – Luke 16:19-31

Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, October 11, 2020

Today's reading is a haunting parable of a man who forgot what was important and failed to wake up before it was too late. The passage begins, "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table."

Even if I had stopped right there and not read one more verse, we could see what was coming, couldn't we? A person of means neglected the needs of one who was destitute and on judgment day the wealthy man paid a heavy price. The poor man, on the other hand, gained in the next life what he never received on earth. This is a patented theme in the Gospel of Luke. Beginning with the first chapter with Mary's song of praise and running throughout, this gospel warns the wealthy not to ignore people who are in need.

Did you notice the name of the wealthy man? No need to start thumbing through your Bible to skim the passage. Jesus never mentioned his name. Jesus told us the name of the poor man: Lazarus. He is a specific person – a human being who is destitute. However, Jesus does leave out a detail. He does not inform us *why* Lazarus is penniless. Why do you think he has fallen into this state devoid of basic needs? Perhaps he had an addiction to alcohol or drugs. Maybe he suffered from PTSD or schizophrenia. Jesus does not tell us why he is so desperate – simply that he is.

Neither did Jesus tell us how the wealthy man became so prosperous. I wonder. Did he inherit a sizable chunk from a well-to-do uncle? Did he work his way out of poverty and make a name for himself? Did he study hard, go to the right schools and land a job that paid an exceptional salary? Again, no details. We simply know that the man was flush.

Keep in mind the wealthy man did not physically abuse Lazarus. He did not hurl ugly epithets his way. The rich man's sin was one of omission. He knew he was obligated to care for the poor man lying at his gate. One's obligation to the poor was spelled out in unambiguous language. Centuries earlier, Moses had made it clear when he said: "If there is among you anyone in need...do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted...You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. Be careful that you do not...view your needy neighbor with hostility and give nothing...Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the LORD your God will bless you...Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor.'" (Deuteronomy 15:7-11)

The wealthy man could not feign ignorance and neither could his brothers. "Father Abraham," he cried out, "Warn my brothers so that they do not end up in hell with me!"

What was Abraham's response? "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them."

This is a story about the great gap between the haves and the have-nots. Jesus pointed to that gap in his time and place, and we dare not ignore it in ours.

In telling this parable, does Jesus intend to indict those with money? Not at all. But it does remind us what happens when wealth becomes our passion. We become blind to the gap. We might want to say that the gap is not our problem, but Jesus says it must be the concern of each of us, because the man at our gate is our brother. The woman standing in line at Emmanuel Dining Room is our sister. The children in the refugee camp are our nieces and nephews.

In the 16th century, Martin Luther commented on this passage. He said, "The rich man's life glitters and shines beautifully but his sheep's clothing conceals a wolf inside. The parable does not accuse him of adultery, murder, robbery, violence or of having done anything that the world would censure...But we must look into his heart and judge his spirit. [That is where the trouble lies.] He has no heart for his neighbor."

In her book, *An Experimental Mutiny against Excess*, Jen Hatmaker says, "I could blame Big Marketing for selling me imagined needs. I could point a finger at culture for peer pressuring me into having nicer things. I might implicate modern parenting, which encourages endless purchases for their kids, ensuring they aren't the 'have-nots' in a sea of 'haves.' I could just dismiss it all with a shrug and casual wave of the hand. Oh, you know me! Retail therapy! But if I'm being truthful, this is a sickening cycle of consumerism that I perpetuate constantly."¹

There are points in life, when we face critical decisions. We have to decide to go to college or into the work force or to join the military. We decide whether we will remain single or choose a mate. We decide what career path to pursue and where to live. A colleague (John Buchanan), reminds us that "beneath those decisions is a more basic decision...it is a deeply personal and spiritual decision of what to live for, what to sacrifice for, what to follow and what to give to."

At some point in our lives each of us made a critical decision. We decided to follow not the whims of culture, but the ways of Christ. And at various milestones we are called upon to demonstrate our commitment with more than words. Each fall we are called upon to confirm our commitment by promising to give a portion of our wealth to God. As today's passage, as well as several others, make clear, our relationship with God is dependent on what we do with what we have.

Sometime in the past few days, you should have received a letter from our Stewardship Committee. It contains a blank pledge card and they are asking you to fill it out and to send it back to the church.

Why are we encouraged to fill out a pledge card? An obvious reason is that it helps our leaders plan the church's budget for the coming year. They can calculate how much we can spend on church school materials, how much financial support we can give to local feeding or housing ministries and how much we can give to our global partners in Guatemala or Congo. They can determine how much to pay our church staff and what must be allotted for utility bills.

However, there are far more important reasons to fill out a pledge card than budget planning. Pledging helps each of us become more intentional in our giving to God. It reminds us to develop a system for setting aside a portion of our rice. It prods us to think about what we have and how generous we could become.

This has been a bizarre and unsettling year. The global pandemic has affected all of us and some much more than others. Some have had their hours cut, others have lost their jobs.

Some of us have also reaped an unexpected benefit. Recently one of our elders pointed out that some of us have saved a fair amount because we have not been driving as much as usual or going to a symphony or sports event or dining out. That is something all of us should consider when considering our pledge for 2021.

Some might ask, "Why not give to the United Way instead of the church?" Who will you seek for counsel when you lose your job or your marriage falls apart? Will the United Way baptize your children? Who will show up in the hospital when you have surgery? Who will pray with you when you're facing a crisis? Who will provide classes to help you grow in your faith and to teach our children about God and what makes for an abundant life? Who will bury your loved one?

Making a pledge also deepens our connection with God. It is a concrete way of demonstrating our commitment. It says, "I'm not going to wait and see if I have anything left over and, if so, give that. Rather, I'm going to commit a certain portion of my income to God because God wants me to support our faith community. God wants me to help people in need. God wants me to become a generous person."

It is impossible to quantify the *impact* our ministry and mission has on our church family, on our community, and on our world. How can you measure a child's realization that God loves her, that Jesus shows her the best path in life, and God will be with her through the dark valleys she will be forced to traverse? How can you determine the value of a person redirecting his focus from self-preoccupation to the satisfaction of lifting another? How can you assess the benefit of someone drawing closer to God or building bridges between interfaith communities or providing a safe place for an at-risk child to succeed in school and learn Christian values?

You may not witness the woman in Guatemala when she receives her gift of chickens that will produce eggs to feed her family. You may not see the man in the transitional housing program who is regaining his self-esteem and embarking on a new path. But God sees that you have been generous and helped them with their basic needs.

Life is an incredible gift. And if we are generous with what we have, we can transform people's lives. And one of the lives that will be transformed is our own.

NOTE

1. Mike Slaughter, *The Christian Wallet*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2016), p.2.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

Every good and perfect gift comes from you, O God of Life. In this hour we are mindful of the blessings in our lives and of the many ways we experience your grace in moments both extraordinary and ordinary. We give thanks for loved ones — for circles of support and the fellowship of friends. We give thanks for communities that embody your care. We give thanks, O God, for your love that binds all things together.

As we pause to remember the blessings we enjoy, we are mindful — too — of all that is not as it should be:

We pray for those we hold dear — our family, our friends, our community of faith. We seek your peace for those who mourn, your comfort for those who are ill, your hope for those who despair. We pray for our neighbors throughout the world, especially those who suffer from devastating disasters or entrenched conflict: We lift before you those suffering from a lack of resources or a poverty of opportunity; those living in neglected neighborhoods or communities plagued by violence; those who feel discarded or devalued ... God — There is so much that tears away at your vision of *Shalom*. Pour out your Spirit upon this hurting world, until all creation experiences your wholeness.

Generous God — You give us imagination and intellect, hands to serve and hearts to love. Help us use these gifts to glorify you. As we long for the day when justice will roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream, we pray that you would draw us into your healing work. When we see need, give us generous spirits. When we see injustice, give us courage to advocate for the 'least of these.' When we see suffering, give us hearts of compassion. When we see despair, give us the faith to proclaim hope. Inspire us, empower us, send us — we pray — to proclaim the good news, until your kingdom comes.

This we pray in the name of your Son, who gave us words to pray:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.