

FIRST LESSON: Amos 6:4-7
SECOND LESSON: Luke 16:19-31
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“When We Only Think About Ourselves”

Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

According to a very simplistic formula, popular even today, wealth is a sign of God’s favor and poverty the result of sin. Job’s friends certainly thought so. The Pharisees of Jesus’ day certainly thought so. And while we might not be so bold as to state it outright, unless we happen to be prosperity gospel preachers, our society does not much like poor people. We judge people for being poor. We say they are poor because they are lazy. They are poor because they are alcoholics or addicts. They are poor because they are ignorant and lack motivation. They are poor because they have low moral values and don’t work hard enough to succeed. They are poor because they are unintelligent.

In my own life two examples of this prejudice stand out. When first separated from my now ex-husband, having three young children I went to the welfare office because we were in desperate need of medical insurance. My parents took us in, but they couldn’t provide that. I was given medical coverage and food stamps, which in those days actually were pieces of paper. When the family doctor referred my youngest son Paul to a dermatologist because of a mole, I thought nothing of it. Until I arrived at the office. I presented my card, only to be dismissed by the woman running the office. “We don’t bother with that,” she told me. “They don’t reimburse enough. The doctor just does it pro bono.” I then expected to be given the paper work to fill in. All of the forms were sitting right there. Instead, she grabbed a yellow legal pad and wrote, “Name” and drew a line, and DOB and drew a line.” She then explained to me that “DOB” meant date of birth. I was stunned. The look she gave me said it all. My son and I were vermin. She clearly assumed I was a high school drop out with an illegitimate child and an IQ of 70 and as such should be grateful for what I got. I was glad Paul was too young to understand what was going on.

The next situation was almost funny. I stood in line at the pharmacy when the woman in line ahead of me threw a complete fit when asked to sign on a list on a clipboard. Everyone in the store could hear her ranting and raving. She said only people on welfare had to do that, and she didn’t want anyone thinking she was on welfare!” When my turn came and I handed the clerk my medical access card we both rolled our eyes.

This parable is about a very rich man and a very poor man at his doorstep. It’s not really the fact that the rich man had money that was the problem, however. It was what he did with his money. He lived a life of great

luxury, while right on his doorstep was a man he could have easily helped. Lazarus, the poor man, was so desperate that he would have been glad to have eaten the scraps of bread thrown from the man's table. Just to explain this, in place of napkins in those days rich people used crusts of bread to clean off their hands and then threw them on the floor. THIS was what the poor man would have been grateful to have. He was literally starving. He would have taken anything. But the rich man did not care. He knew Lazarus was there, but he did nothing to help the desperate situation. He only thought about himself.

Lazarus and the rich man were separated in life by the gate at the rich man's house. The rich man was insulated from the troubles of the real world outside. The distance between the two worlds was vast. And yet it could have been bridged. All it would have taken would be for the rich man to send a servant out to tend to Lazarus' wounds and bring him food. That alone could have saved Lazarus' life. Instead, Lazarus died. But the rich man died too, and it was then that their fortunes reversed.

There are those who take what happens next in the story literally. Where content to see symbolism in other parables of Jesus, they don't here because it's about heaven and hell. But just as Jesus does not want us to literally cut off our hand if it causes us to sin, this is not a literal representation of heaven and hell. This is a story with a point. Jesus also said, "I am the door" but we don't look for wood and a doorknob on his person. It's a figure of speech. The angels carried Lazarus to Abraham's bosom. This was a way of expressing closeness and intimacy. The rich man was sent to Hades. He was in torment in flames and he longed for just one drop of water. There was a huge chasm between the two. But remember, regardless of what anyone tells you, this is not the actual geography of the afterlife.

Metaphorically the flames could symbolize an experience. Don't we actually say, "I got burned," when something goes dreadfully wrong? There are more kinds of torment than physical. Hell does not have to involve actual flames. There is psychological and spiritual torment. We can be in despair. People commit suicide to escape from this level of despair, but once dead, there is no escape. Imagine being tormented enough to commit suicide, but being unable to do it because you are already dead. It's not possible to opt out of hell. But the rich man asks for some relief. He asks for water, a symbol of cooling respite. And yet even as he asks, the rich man still doesn't treat Lazarus as an equal. It is from Lazarus that he wants help, but instead he asks Father Abraham to send Lazarus. Even in death Lazarus is considered a servant. Even in Abraham's arms Lazarus is somehow too inferior to be addressed directly.

Superficially in this story it looks like the only reason the rich man is in hell is because he had a good life on earth and the only reason Lazarus is in heaven is because he had a terrible life on earth. But it's not that simple. Lazarus is given a name. He is not just "the beggar." The name Lazarus means "God is my helper." The name vindicates Lazarus and tells us what kind of man he was. Despite everything he looked to God. And despite all of the abundant physical blessings the rich man had, he turned away from God when he turned away from the one in need on his doorstep.

When the rich man asked for help Abraham explained that it was impossible to do so because, “between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.” Once life in this world is over the dye is cast. There is no going back and changing anything.

When the rich man realizes there is nothing he can do for himself, he asks on behalf of his family, saying, “Then I beg you, Father, send Lazarus to my family, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.” But Abraham responded, “They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.”

If they had listened, what would Moses and the prophets have told them? From “Moses” or the first five books of the Bible they would have heard repeatedly in Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy not to mistreat aliens, widows and orphans (Exodus 22:21-22; 23:9; Leviticus 19:33; Deuteronomy 24:17-18) to leave gleanings for the poor (Leviticus 19:9-10; 23:22), to bring tithes to support Levites, aliens, the fatherless, and widows (Deuteronomy 14:28-29; 26:12-15), to include aliens and the fatherless and widows in all their celebrations (Deuteronomy 16:9-15) and something that was likely NEVER done, to cancel all debts every seventh year and to be generous to the needy (Deuteronomy 15:1-11). From the prophets they would have heard to observe justice (Isaiah 5:7-10; Micah 3:1-3), not exploit workers (Isaiah 58:3), to plead the case of the fatherless and to defend the rights of the poor (Jeremiah 5:25-29). Hosea also warns against using dishonest scales and (Hosea 12:7-9) and along with Amos and Malachi, not to take advantage of the vulnerable (Amos 2:6-8; Malachi 3:5). But the rich man knows it won't be enough. They've been hearing this all their lives and not taken any of it seriously. “No, father Abraham,” he says, “but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.” But Abraham responds, “If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”

Rather striking words, don't you think?

The message to the living is quite simple. We must love God and use money, not use God and love money. Instead of being self-centered, we should be God-centered. When we are God-centered our eyes are open to the need around us, and we look at our material resources not as something to hoard or use only for ourselves, but as something to be put to good use to help others. Tomorrow is too late to do this. Later never comes. As the bumper sticker I once read said, “Many people who wait till the eleventh hour die at 10:30.” The time to do good is now because Lazarus is at the gate. We're often good at rationalizing our conduct in this world as if it doesn't really matter. But it does matter. All of it matters to God. Amen.

Amos 6:4-7

⁴ You lie on beds adorned with ivory
and lounge on your couches.

You dine on choice lambs
and fattened calves.

⁵ You strum away on your harps like David
and improvise on musical instruments.

⁶ You drink wine by the bowlful
and use the finest lotions,
but you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph.

⁷ Therefore you will be among the first to go into exile;
your feasting and lounging will end.

Luke 16:19-31

¹⁹ “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. ²⁰ At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores ²¹ and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

²² “The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³ In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴ So he called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’

²⁵ “But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. ²⁶ And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’

²⁷ “He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, ²⁸ for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’

²⁹ “Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’

³⁰ “‘No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’

³¹ “He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”