

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
25 September 2022

Luke 16:19-31

I remember visiting the White House for the first time in the early 1980s. I had just arrived in the United States and a local Catholic Priest invited me to accompany him and his youth group into the Capital. We arrived in the late evening and went straight to the White House, after checking in into our hotel. At first sight, the grandeur of the place took my breath away. It was now evening and the entire place was engulfed in brilliant lights, creating an other-worldly sight. I had never seen such splendor, such beauty, and such a powerful symbol of America's might and wealth. Of course, as many of you may remember, If you visited the White House at night in the 1980's, you couldn't help it but to see dozens of people wrapped in dirty blankets, sleeping right outside of the beautiful iron gates. I remember being shocked, saddened, and heartbroken by the contrast of the two worlds in front of me. On the one hand, I could see The White House, home of the president of the most powerful and wealthiest nation in the world. On the other side, I could see dozens of poor people, who were ignored by the locals, hated by the White House staff, feared by tourists, and often abused by the police.

We have a very similar story in the Gospel today. Let me set the context. Last week Jesus was teaching his disciples while the Pharisees looked on. He finished telling his disciples the parable of the dishonest manager in verse 13, and then we read in verse 14, "The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed him." Jesus then turns his attention to these Pharisees and begins to teach them about true religion being a matter of the heart, about the law, and about divorce. He then tells them a parable that begins the same way as last week's parable, "There was a rich man..." I find it interesting that Jesus has given three consecutive parables that start the same way. "There was a rich man who had two sons... (Luke 15:11-32), "There was a rich man who had a manager... (Luke 16:1-8), and "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple..." (Luke 16:19-31). Perhaps Luke wants us to see a connection between these three "Rich Man" parables.

The story today tells us about an incredibly wealthy man and a poor man by the name of Lazarus. We know the first man is very wealthy because he dresses in purple and we know that purple dye was extremely rare and very expensive. Purple was considered the color of royalty because only the royalty or the very wealthy could afford it. We also know that he "feasted sumptuously every day." Now, a good banquet from time to time is always fun, but this man had expensive banquets every day, which is an indication of his great wealth. We also know that he had a large house with a large courtyard and a gate. Right outside that gate there was a poor beggar. And the contrasts between the two men could not be more pronounced.

Whereas the rich man was covered in purple, Lazarus was covered in sores. Whereas the rich man reclined at his daily banquet and had foods of all colors and flavors, Lazarus longed for even the scraps falling from the wealthy man's table. Commentators tell us that one of the uses for bread at these lavished banquets was to clean the guests hands of the grease of meats or other foods, as folks used their hands to eat. The bread would then be thrown to the dogs under the table. Lazarus, we are told, longed for these scraps of bread. Whereas the wealthy man had a great home, Lazarus was homeless and paralyzed. He had to be carried by others and placed at the gate every day. He was absolutely helpless to even scare the wild dogs away, and we are told that these dogs "would come and lick his sores". Whereas the wealthy man was considered to be "blessed by God" and "righteous" because of his wealth, Lazarus was considered unclean and "under God's curse." Finally, whereas the wealthy man was a person of great influence who enjoyed the company of those in high places, Lazarus was unseen, ignored, just another faceless beggar.

There was a great chasm between the wealthy man and Lazarus. A chasm that went beyond the distance between the banquet table and the gate outside the house. This chasm can best be described as a "chasm of remembrance." Let me explain. The verb "to remember" means to bring to mind or to think of something again. It also means to keep in your memory, to think of something or someone often. The wealthy man passed by Lazarus daily and yet he failed to see him. He failed to consider the poor man's needs. Lazarus was invisible to him. The beggar never came to his mind, he never remembered to help him, to talk to him, to invite him for some food, to provide a little shelter for him in bad weather. He failed to remember the poor man's humanity basically because he didn't care to remember. He failed to bring to mind the fact that this poor man was his neighbor, a neighbor who was in desperate need, a neighbor who was treated far worse than his own dogs. The two men were worlds apart because the wealthy man failed to keep in mind that he had a duty to care for those less fortunate than himself. He had a memory problem that was self-imposed. He did not remember the poor because he didn't care to remember them. He had other things in his mind.

Jesus continues with the story. The two men died and we see them on the other side of this life. We are told that Lazarus was carried by angels to Abraham's bosom. We are also told that even while the wealthy man's physical body was being buried with great honors, his soul was being tormented in Hades. In this reading, Hades is presented as the place of punishment, the everlasting destiny for those who have a memory problem of the type we just discussed. We are told that the wealthy man was tormented by flames. At some point, he looks up to heaven and sees Lazarus at Abraham's side. He exclaims, "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." Even in hell the man still sees Lazarus as a servant, as an inferior person, as someone whose only destiny is to serve the rich. Abraham does not refute the fact that the man is one of his sons. He in fact responds, "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”.

Not everyone who calls Abraham his father will inherit the kingdom of heaven. Or as Jesus himself puts it, “Not everyone who calls me Lord will enter the Kingdom of Heaven” (my paraphrase). Abraham responds by saying, “Remember!” Remember today what you failed to remember all your life. Remember that the poor are your neighbors and that you are bound to care for them. Remember that the poor have names and that they are loved by God. Abraham says, “Remember!” Could it be that Hell is the place of hyper-awareness, the place where we are doomed to remember all our failures? Our lack of love, our selfishness, our inability to forgive others, our self-directed behaviors that alienate us from others and God, and our stubborn tendencies to act as though others don’t exist? Could it be that Hell is the place of remembrance?

Abraham continues, “Besides 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.” The place to fix the chasm that separates us from our brothers and sisters is here and now. There will be no opportunity to repair this chasm once we are gone. This is the time and the place when the disciples of Jesus Christ remember the words of the Master, “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me” (Matthew 25:35-36).

Now, when I was growing up this parable was preached in opposition to the wealthy (perhaps as a way to cause the type of guilt that filled the coffers of our churches!) But this parable is not about money, as much as it is about attitude, about an internal inclination of the heart. After all, remember Genesis 13:2, “Now Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver and in gold.” Abraham, a very rich man, is in heaven! Lazarus is said to be in Abraham’s bosom. The issue is not wealth, but our memory problem. Our failure to remember the poor! We cannot let wealth build a chasm of separation between us and others. We cannot insulate ourselves in our comfortable bubbles and pretend we don’t see the pain of the world. There are beggars at the gates outside of each of our homes. Some of them are spiritual beggars in need of Jesus of Nazareth. Some of them are our neighbors in need of our help, attention, friendship, and love.

Today I encourage, indeed I challenge all of us to remember. Remember the beggars in our life. Remember whose disciples we are. Amen!