

Sermon - September 29, 2019

“A Beggar’s Tale”

Text: Luke 16:19-31

In our trip to England a few years ago, we visited the famous Westminster Abbey. This work of architectural genius is first and foremost, a burial place for the royalty, of well-known states people, poets, artists, historians, religious, military and political leaders – those who have made a name in history. These people have so much wealth that they were able to provide for themselves monuments of gold or ivory or marble laden with gems of different shapes and colours. Even the tomb inscriptions have been carefully crafted to denote the dead person’s standing while living. The tomb inscription of King Henry VII, for example, reads: *“Here lies Henry the Seventh of that name, formerly King of England, son of Edmund, Earl of Richmond. He was created King on August 22 and immediately afterwards, on October 30, he was crowned at Westminster in the year of our Lord 1485. He died subsequently on April 21 in the 53rd year of his age. He reigned 23 years eight months, less one day”*

The common folks, on the other hand, those who lived ordinary lives, are more than likely to end up in unmarked graves. No expensive monuments to honour them. In contrast to Westminster Abbey’s prestige, we accidentally bumped into an old graveyard in Cheltenham at St. Mary’s Church. An obscure grave marking caught our attention which also gained international fame especially among tourists. The grave belongs to John Higgs, a pig butcher who died in 1825. His tomb inscription says: *“Here lies John Higgs, a famous man for killing pigs. For killing pigs was his delight, both morning, afternoon and night. Both heats and colds he did endure, which no physician could ere cure. His knife is laid, his work is done I hope to heaven his soul has gone.”*

Westminster Abbey – St. Mary’s Graveyard. Two contrasting burial places; one for the rich and the other for the poor. Even in death, one can sense a gap, a division, a great chasm between the haves and the have-nots; the famous and the common; the affluent and the destitute; King Henry VII and John Higgs; the rich man and Lazarus.

Luke strikes again with his bias against the affluent. He presents us with a parable that brings us face-to-face with the socio-political- religious- economic conditions in the first century. Unlike other parables, this one spans this life and the afterlife. Most scholars claim that the background of this parable is an Egyptian tale about the reversal of fortunes in the afterlife. It also has connections to rabbinic stories. The Greek name Lazarus is the same as the name Eliezer who in Genesis 15:2 tells us, was a servant of Abraham. This parable expands Luke's theme on the reversal of fortunes expressed in the Magnificat: "God has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree."

According to Luke, Jesus tells this parable – with two very contrasting characters in a dramatic and vivid description. We should note here as a matter of social context that Jesus' audience believe that wealth is God's blessings and poverty is God's punishment or curse for being sinful. The two men in the parable do not interact in life – this is simply the way things are in Jesus' time. The rich socializes with the rich and the poor mingles with the poor. A clear division of economic status. But the story also reflects the ancient belief that everyone, the righteous and the wicked will see each other after death. Note the following contrasts:

*The rich man was dressed regally in purple robe; Lazarus was covered with sores.

*The rich man had so much food that he could possibly eat yet did not share it; Lazarus ate the crumbs or leftovers from the rich man's table.

*The rich man lived in a palatial, comfortable mansion with lots of servants who attended to his needs; Lazarus was homeless, a mendicant and begged on the street.

*The rich man was healthy, strong and could afford medical and dental benefits; Lazarus was weak, malnourished, starving, with an infectious disease, who could not afford any medical intervention.

*The rich man perhaps was visible and famous, one who held an important position in the community; Lazarus was invisible, ignored by people around him.

But here's a significant reversal: The rich man in the parable was nameless. Over the years when the church began to speak Latin, they gave him a name -- *Dives*, meaning "rich." But the beggar has a name: Lazarus, meaning "God helps" which implies righteousness. The Lazarus in

this parable is not the same Lazarus in the gospel of John who was raised by Jesus to life. In the Jewish tradition, naming a person means that you are rooted in a community, a family, you belong to someone. In the case of Lazarus, he was a child of God. He belongs to God. “God helps”, indeed, because the rich man and the human community has not done their acts of compassion or mercy or kindness to Lazarus. They have failed to see and empathize with the conditions of Lazarus. This naming of Lazarus is indeed significant for this is the only parable where Jesus named a character. Therefore, Lazarus is someone very much part of Jesus’ community and ours. He should not be ignored nor be treated as invisible. Naming the beggar and leaving the rich man nameless certainly reverses the world's standard!

For us today, if we are given the option to choose, we could easily see ourselves relate to the rich man – he offers a world of comfort, fame, power, wealth – all those things that we hope for in life. Who would want to be Lazarus whose daily existence is carved in sores, poverty, hunger, homelessness? Jeffrey Simpson of the Globe and Mail puts it this way: “the rich, whatever that means, can take care of themselves. The poor, whatever that means, have largely dropped off the political map.” Dropped off – vanished – invisible! In this first world where we live, a land flowing with milk and honey, a place of abundance, it is difficult to understand why we still are talking about eradicating poverty.

Come to think of it – here at BCUC, why do we keep up with service and outreach programs that support refugees, the FAMSAC, the homeless? Why do we make noise and support those who rally on the streets to get the politicians’ attention to enact laws in favour of the poor and the underdogs? Why? Because whether we pay attention or not, the poor are still with us. That is a fact! And they will stay here unless we do something about it. This parable is not a story to condone economic poverty. This is more of an eye-opener to realize that poverty is an existing social reality – a disease in Jesus’ time and ours. It’s obvious why we’ve got the poor with us. Because we have not shared enough love, not enough care, not enough compassion, not enough justice. We still have a lot to do!! The rich man in the story is not disdainful towards Lazarus; but we know that he could have directly contributed to Lazarus’ pathetic condition. The rich man simply did not notice Lazarus because his vision is focused somewhere else. The rich man’s shortcoming towards Lazarus is neglect of his existence and being deaf to his cries of

anguish. The only ones who notice Lazarus and gave him company are the dogs. And in Jesus' times – the dogs are the outcasts, the sinners, the lepers, the Gentiles. This parable is telling us to open our eyes! To pay attention to what is happening around us: to empathize towards the needs of others and listen to their cries. Bob Dylan have sung it to us – *“How many eyes must one man have / before he sees the sky? How many ears must one man have/ before he hears people cry?”*

And then, the inevitable happens. Both men died. And here we see the parable shift to another episode – this time in the afterlife. Woven into the experience of death is the world of the comforted and that of the afflicted. The rich man went to Hades, or in Hebrew, it is called Sheol, the bottomless pit, the abode of the dead. In our language, hell. And Lazarus is comforted in the bosom of Abraham. Before we jump to conclusions, we need to realize that reading this parable literally will not help you define “heaven” and ‘hell”, although we read that the rich man was tormented in burning flames and Lazarus was enjoying himself with cool water and good food. This parable can't help us build any sort of afterlife theology. This is purely a story of contrast, a literary ploy with metaphors to symbolize how it is to be in heaven or in hell, to make a clear point; and the point is this: we have to make the right choices here and now, while we are still breathing and alive – for these choices will have never-ending consequences! The decisions we make in life will give us a taste of heaven or a taste of hell. But I'm sure of one thing. If we distance ourselves from beggars like Lazarus, we are digging our very own chasm – a permanent distance not only from those who need our compassion, our presence, our love and attention, but more importantly from the life-giving God. The rich man calls Abraham his "Father." But we know that claiming a religious heritage is not enough to experience shalom or life in its wholeness. Rather, living a life characterized by active compassion to others is a sign that we are responding to God's will for the world.

In real life, the sins of callousness and indifference usually don't have happy endings. So it's a story that bothers us, but it's here in the gospel of Luke, and it won't go away. As we approach Thanksgiving Day, we need to revisit the many chasms that divide us – how do we respond to the beggars at our gates? How do we treat those whom society regards as invisible? How do we create a society that brings mutuality to the blacks and whites? To the citizens and the

immigrants? To the straight and the LGBTQ? To Christians and non-Christians? There are so many Lazaruses in our communities that need our immediate attention. They might not be sitting in our gates but they roam our communities, the streets of affluent neighbourhoods. They are also outside the gates of Canada in countries where life and humanity are taken for granted. Lazarus, whom God helps, is knocking in every gate of our lives. When we answer and open that gate, we may find someone who doesn't look, smell, or speak like us. That someone might be Christ in disguise, only if we have eyes to see. Amen.

Sources Read:

1. Rev. William L. Turner, "World Hunger: Beggars at the Gate". www.preaching.com
2. www.warrenswyndhamwritings.blogspot.ca, "Eternal Consequences"
3. Rev. Dr. John Pavelko, <http://www.crossroadspc.org>, "Calculating The Risks"
4. <http://www.patheos.com/Progressive-Christian/Rich-Man-Lazarus-Alyce-McKenzie>, Rewarded in Heaven? A Lectionary Reflection for Pentecost 19C - Luke 16:19-31
5. Robert Cornwall, bobcornwall.com
6. Helen Motgomery Debevoise, *Feasting on the Word, Year C.*, pp. 116-120