

*Ps. 91:1-6, 14-16*

*Luke 16:19-31*

*Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Evie Macway*

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## Now is The Time

It is an ominous and challenging text, this one. The rich man and Lazarus. Particularly for us, who, we know, by most of the world's standards are extravagantly rich. We may not all dress in purple and fine linen, and feast sumptuously every day, but the story takes us in still.

The parable is a familiar one. Interestingly, it appears only in Luke's gospel. The story comes in the midst of a series of parables by Jesus in Luke on the faithful stewardship of our goods, of what we have.<sup>1</sup> Good timing as we head into October when we will hear a lot more about stewardship from our faithful stewardship committee.

Luke is the gospel writer, more than the others it seems, who emphasizes throughout his writing the themes of justice for the poor and judgment for the rich. It stands out in Luke.

It is Luke who begins his gospel with the Magnificat in which Jesus' mother sings that God has, "scattered the proud in the imaginations of their hearts, put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree." It is in Luke's version of the beatitudes that Jesus declares, 'blessed are the poor', not blessed are 'the poor in spirit' as Matthew writes and, "Blessed are you who are hungry, for you will be filled" and "woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation."

In a way this parable of Lazarus and the rich man gives body and soul to this theme of economic justice in Luke. It brings us Luke's message in story form. "Rich" and "Poor" are no longer vague generalities, but are depicted as two men, one inside the gate of abundance and one outside.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 4, pg. 116*

<sup>2</sup> *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 4, pg. 116*

For most of us, who, by the standards of our world, have spent most of our lives inside that gate of abundance this is a difficult parable to hear. It calls us to look at our lives and our choices. We cannot avoid the powerful indictments, of our world and our selves, that we hear in these verses. Given this truth, where is the Gospel, the Good News for us this morning?

This parable of the rich man and Lazarus has two parts. First we meet the rich man. His wealth is clear. He dresses in purple cloth and feasts every day. He is even wealthy enough to have a gate to keep distance between him and the rest of the world.

Next we meet Lazarus. Lazarus is the only person in all of Jesus' parables to be given a name. This in itself gives us a hint of what is to come. Naming is important in scripture. But Lazarus' poverty is as graphic here as the rich man's wealth. While the rich one is dressed in purple, Lazarus is 'dressed' in sores. Lazarus lay outside the rich one's gate, hungry, covered with sores, longing to be satisfied. In just a few lines Jesus illustrates the chasm, the great distance, between the socio-economic conditions of the rich man and Lazarus. The contrast is sharp. But Jesus does not let his hearers miss the proximity of their relationship either. Lazarus lies at the rich man's gate, yearning for the crumbs that fall from his table. There is a connection between the rich man and Lazarus, but the rich man does not see it.

Now the story shifts. Both men die. Lazarus is whisked off by angels to the bosom of Abraham, a place of eternal safety and favor. We hear simply that the rich man died and was buried. He came to reside in Hades, a place of eternal torment and flames. The chasm between the two men persists but now their situations are reversed.

*Now, now* the rich man sees Lazarus. *Now* he recognizes his connection to Lazarus and asks for his help. "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in the water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames."

Abraham's response here in the story is harsh and clear. It is too late. In response to the rich man's request for relief from the agonies he is suffering Abraham says, it is too late. The chasm that has formed between you and the poor among you is great and profound. So too is the chasm between heaven and hell.

When the rich man begs for another chance on behalf of his brothers, Abraham is firm. And we hear that message that hits closest to home for us. "They have Moses

and the prophets. They should listen to them. If they do not listen to them neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”

The message is clear and speaks as directly to us as it did to the early church and the first who read and heard Luke’s gospel. Have we been listening? Even though we profess our faith in the one who rises from the dead that we might know God’s love, forgiving grace and faithfulness to *all* people, have we been listening?

The indictments of this parable are woven throughout. First and foundationally, riches are not a sign of God’s favor. Nor is poverty a sign of God’s judgment, in this life or any other. As much as our culture is often tempted to believe this, it is not true. This parable is a scathing commentary on that belief. Jesus preaches against this idea over and over. Riches are not a sign of God’s favor. Nor is poverty a sign of God’s judgment.

Second, if you are ‘rich’, to be blind to those who are ‘poor’ is wrong. And third, and most pointedly probably in this parable, those who help to create the chasm, the economic, social and emotional distance between the rich and the poor can not bridge this distance in any life **but this one**. And bridging that distance, being in community, living a life of justice is what our faith is about.

There is a saying, ‘Justice delayed is justice denied’. Jesus’ teaching here seems to imply that ‘redemption delayed is redemption denied’.<sup>3</sup> This parable makes clear the gospel message that for God, love and justice are inseparable. And, as we read later in the New Testament thanks to James, ‘faith without works is dead.’

These indictments are clear and familiar to us. We know that peace and justice go hand in hand. We know more than ever these days, if we look, that all of creation is connected. And we know that what we do, and do not do *makes a difference*. We can not close our eyes to suffering, to injustice. This message, from Moses, through the prophets, and in Jesus Christ, the one who rises from the dead that we might know the extent of God’s love and grace, is consistent and clear. We who are rich, by most standards feel the burden of these words, and we should.

There is another message here however that we too must hear. With these words Jesus is reminding us that now is the time. Though it was too late for the five brothers, it is not for us. That I believe, is the whole point of this parable. Now is the time. The message is consistent, and it has been from the beginning. What you

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<sup>3</sup> *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 4, pg. 116*

do makes a difference. Look. See and do. Now is the time. It is our calling daily to work out how we will work for justice here and now, you and I.

This morning we have a good example of how you, Stone Church, do this as a community. In a few minutes we will take some time to publicly thank all those who have worked to transform Roycott House into a home for a refugee family. You saw a need and responded, in a very tangible way. And so many of you have been part of that response. Now. Here.

Since I have been here I have also witnessed how you as individuals look, see and do...now. You sit with someone who needs a listening ear. You provide a meal or a ride. You work with children and youth. You serve in organizations that bring about structural change. You pray. In your own ways, with the gifts God has given you, you work for justice now, here.

This morning Lazarus and the rich man remind us to keep on doing what we are doing. Now is the time. Now is our time. May we continue to live the peace, justice and joy of Jesus Christ. Now.