

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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I need to confess that I don't like today's parable. It's been a thorn in my side all week, and you're probably getting the fourth rewrite of this sermon, but honestly, I stopped counting on Friday, so I don't know. What makes me most uncomfortable is that I cannot seem to find the "gospel." And when I say "gospel" I mean it in the Lutheran sense—the good news, that reminder of God's grace, the recounting of God's love, the thing that picks me up when the world kicks me down. Instead, this parable has a lot of fire and brimstone, a lot of talk about an afterlife, and it is based on the actions of the rich man and Lazarus.

In my struggle to write this sermon, I asked my partner Alex to help me. So, I told him the story. I mentioned the nameless rich man who feasted, and poor Lazarus with open sores. I introduced interesting tidbits about how Lazarus is the only named character in any of Jesus' parables and about how the poor would sit on benches outside the rich's lavish parties so that they could have the leftovers. I also stated how in the afterlife the rich man called Lazarus by name showing that he knew Lazarus, perhaps even saw Lazarus day after day, and still he made a conscious choice not to help. At the end of my retelling, I asked him, "so what do you think?" He said to me, "it sounds like a story, and you'll probably tell everyone about how they need to help the poor, you'll remind them to be kind to the immigrants, and to help those in need, and you might even do that thing you love to do when you list as many minority groups as you can think of as you build the

intensity.” And that’s where he stopped—that was it. Then, I remembered why I don’t often ask him for help.

But that exchange in the car, got me thinking. I began to realize why I struggled so much with this text. Perhaps I’m trying to get one of Jesus’s parables to become the whole of Jesus’s ministry. I’m seeking to find something that doesn’t exist in that parable.

Don’t get me wrong, this parable is important. After all, we who sit here in this church, in the United States, and in Wicker Park, we are rich. Even if you only get SNAP benefits (otherwise called food stamps) you are richer than 52% of the world,¹ and if you happen to make more than \$60,000, you are in the richest 1% of the world!² With the proliferation of media, we know the names, the stories, and the situations of the poor outside our door. It’s the underpaid laborer named Lazarus who makes your clothing so that you can get a “good deal.” It’s the hungry, emaciated child named Lazarus that you ignore as you toss out that buy-one-get-one food stuff you didn’t use. It’s the Haitian person named Lazarus that will be impacted most by our carbon-producing lifestyle. The truth is that in our globalized society it doesn’t matter if Lazarus is waiting outside these church doors, on State Street, or on the other side of the globe, you and I, we know Lazarus and yet we choose not to act each day.

So, of course, my partner would think I say something like that. But, he was wrong about one thing, I won’t stop there. I can’t stop there. Because today’s reading is a

¹ <https://howrichami.givingwhatwecan.org/how-rich-am-i?income=3000&countryCode=USA&household%5Badults%5D=1&household%5Bchildren%5D=0>

² <https://howrichami.givingwhatwecan.org/how-rich-am-i?income=60000&countryCode=USA&household%5Badults%5D=1&household%5Bchildren%5D=0>

parable not a prediction.³ This is a story meant to change us, it is not the ending. In our hearing we are like those rich man's siblings that he wanted to warn. And not only do we have Moses and the prophets, but we also have the Risen One among us. In Christ's resurrection, we have seen how love begets love, how goodness is stronger than evil, and how God's mission results in justice for all. In this place, we have experienced how bags of love have turned our experience of an unnamed homeless person into a beloved, named, and known child of God. As a community, we have seen the Risen Christ as we proclaim the full inclusion of those on the margins who have been cast out because of what they look like, where they're from, or who they love. In our baptism, we have heard the voice of the Risen One say, "I am with you forever."

You see, it's because we have experienced all of that and so much more that we can respond with love. We are rich in God's love. It is in this knowledge that we gather at this table each week to feast at Christ's meal. A meal where all are welcome, a table where we are fed so that we might feed others, and a gathering where we can be sent to share our gifts without strings or hesitation. You see, that's the gospel, that's the grace, and that's the love. It's something given to us in water and word, in bread and wine. It's nurtured in fellowship and service. And it's a reminder that there is enough for all, so we freely share with all.

So, Alex was partially right, and I'll be sure that doesn't go to his head. Yet, the acts of caring, sharing, and daring to love are the result of a God who has shown us the way. Our God who promises that we're not alone. Our God who provides

³ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/on-stretching-parables>

abundantly so that we might share abundantly. The parable is not over, the Risen One is present, and now we can help in writing God's full story. Amen.