

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

September 28, 2025 (Proper 21, Year C)
Luke 16:19-31

Do you think the rich man even SAW him?

They were NEIGHBORS, you know. LAZARUS SAW the rich man every day. And EVERY DAY, the Rich Man ENCOUNTERED this beggar at his front gate – at least he COULD have seen him. He was RIGHT THERE. But he NEVER ACTUALLY SAW him. He either dismissed him as a non-person, or ignored him in contempt and disgust. He couldn't see BEYOND HIS OWN MATERIAL WEALTH. He was too absorbed in what HE had to notice the needs of those AROUND him. And when you lose sight of your NEIGHBOR, you lose sight of GOD too.

Lazarus was not only homeless, but crippled. Literally, it reads in Greek that he "had been THROWN" at the gates of the rich man's house. "HAD BEEN THROWN" — he didn't get there by his own power; he was flung there by others. He didn't even have the strength to shoo away the dogs that licked his sores. The dogs probably stole the little BREAD he'd BEGGED for too. Dogs in the ancient world symbolized contempt. And ironically, the DOGS were more aware of his WOUNDS than the RICH man EVER was.

But then Jesus describes an abrupt and dramatic reversal of fortune. Each of the men dies. Lazarus was carried away by ANGELS TO HEAVEN, to be with Abraham. In the end, LAZARUS BECAME the RICH one.

All that Jesus says about the RICH man is that he was BURIED. Isn't it strange that that's ALL he says. After all, the festivities of HIS funeral must have been something the community would REMEMBER for YEARS. But apparently, that didn't IMPRESS JESUS. Oh, and Jesus DID add one ADDITIONAL fact about the rich man's death. HIS soul went to HELL. In the end, HE became the BEGGAR.

What's that you say? What's this story have to do with you? You're NO rich man? Well, from the standpoint of material wealth, we Americans have a hard time REALIZING just how RICH we REALLY ARE. Years ago, Robert Heilbroner, who wrote dozens of books on the subject of the economy, suggested that we go through a little mental exercise that will HELP us count our blessings. This is what daily life is like for more than a billion people in the world. Imagine this:

First, take out all the furniture in your home, except for one table and maybe a couple of wooden chairs. You can use blankets and pads for beds.

Second, throw out all your clothes, except for your oldest dress or suit, a shirt or blouse. Leave only one pair of shoes.

Third, all your kitchen APPLIANCES have vanished. Keep a box of matches, a small bag of flour, some sugar and salt, a handful of onions, a dish of dried beans. Rescue the moldy potatoes from the garbage can – those are tonight's meal.

Fourth, dismantle the bathroom, and shut off the running water. Take out all the electrical wiring and lights in your house, and everything ELSE that runs by electricity.

Fifth, take away the HOUSE ITSELF and move the family into the tool shed.

Sixth, place your "house" in a shantytown. No more postman, fireman, or any other government services.

Seventh, cancel all subscriptions to newspapers, magazines, and book clubs. This is no great LOSS, because now NONE of you can READ anyway.

Eighth, leave only one radio for the whole shantytown.

Ninth, move the nearest hospital or clinic ten miles away and put a midwife in charge instead of a doctor.

Tenth, throw away your bankbooks, stock certificates, pension plans, and insurance policies.

You now have ten dollars to your name.

Eleventh, get out and start cultivating your three acres. Try hard to raise a few hundred dollars of cash crops, because your landlord wants one third and your moneylender 10 percent.

Twelfth, find some way for your children to bring in a little extra money so you have something to EAT most days. But it won't be enough to keep bodies healthy...so lop off 25 to 30 years of life.

THAT'S what life is like for more than a BILLION people in the world. And he wrote that many years ago. How much MORE of a disparity is there NOW?

By comparison, how RICH WE are! And WITH our wealth comes responsibility. We are called to use it WISELY, and HELP others.

The truth is: enough food is produced in the world to feed every man, woman, and child on this planet. God provides our daily bread, and God has given us ENOUGH. And yet, statistically, on average, for every breath we take, a CHILD DIES somewhere in the world – EVERY breath, a child dies. (Heave a sigh) That was another child's life. And that goes on day and night.

Bread for the World estimates that an American city throws away as GARBAGE enough food to supply an entire EUROPEAN city of the SAME SIZE, and a EUROPEAN city throws away enough food to feed an Asian or African city of the same size. We ask HOW God can ALLOW such suffering in the world, but God looks at us and asks, "How can YOU?"

You may look at your neighbor and think that YOUR story is SEPARATE from his story or her story, but WE ARE CONNECTED. It's undeniable. Our individual stories intertwine in ways we can't even SEE. But the PUBLISHER of our stories, the one who writes them in the book of life, knows that EACH of us affects the OUTCOME of our NEIGHBOR'S story.

Abraham says that BETWEEN people, between heaven and hell, "a great chasm has been fixed." But who put it there? GOD didn't put it there; WE did, and we DO. We construct it in LIFE, by IGNORING the needs of others, and, in DEATH, we're TORMENTED by that chasm—a hell of our own making. Even in hell, the rich man thinks that Lazarus ought to SERVE him. He looks up to heaven, and STILL thinks that Lazarus is LESS than him, BENEATH him.

No one can cross THAT chasm, but JESUS ALREADY HAS. He died for us. He descended to hell for our sins, but HE rose again. He crossed that chasm.

In 1 Peter it says that Jesus preached to the spirits and hell, and brought them OUT WITH him at his resurrection. And he can bring US with him too.

As Jesus tells this story, he's not saying that WE are this PARTICULAR rich man; we are the five BROTHERS of the rich man. We still HAVE the opportunity to change. We're LEARNING to FEEL the pain of Lazarus, to ACTUALLY SEE him. We're learning to hear the grief of those who suffer.

We're learning to follow the example of Jesus, who entered INTO their pain, and gave it a voice, and gave it a NAME. The name Lazarus literally MEANS "God is my help." "God is my help." It's the ONLY name given to ANYONE in ANY of Jesus' parables – not the Good Samaritan, not the Prodigal Son, not even that rich man was given a name. Only poor Lazarus. It demonstrates the HEART of our Lord. The ONLY WAY ANY of us makes it to heaven is to say, like Lazarus, "GOD is my help."

There's a story that came out of September 11th. When the towers fell, there was a man who got caught in the rubble, and as the ash cloud came over him, it got so dark that he thought he'd gone blind. But then he saw a light. It was a flashlight, and he saw a hand reaching for him, and he heard a voice that simply said, "grab on." He grabbed the hand, and as he was being pulled out of the rubble, he felt someone else grab his other hand, and on it went. A whole chain of people were saved that day by one light, and one hand, and one voice saying, "grab on." They never even saw his face, he was off to help other people.

(Go to the baptismal font.) This is where GOD reaches down for US, and pulls us up, and saves us. (Dip hand in the water.) This is where God cleanses OUR wounds and cools our tongues. This is where we see the light of CHRIST, and this is where we hear that voice saying, “I’ve got you.”

And out there in the world is where we reach down to help the NEXT person. That’s what disciples do – we reach down and help the NEXT person, because Christ first reached down for us. Amen.