

Sermon 10-6-2013 Luke 16:19-31 Psalm 37:1-9 "Hearing the Message"

Today is World Communion Sunday. Throughout the world, churches of all denominations, in all nations, in many languages, are celebrating the Lord's Supper. This day reminds us that we are connected to each other and to something larger than the story of any one nation or people. We must remember that we are brothers and sisters of every person throughout the world - no matter our differences - who believes that Jesus Christ is Lord!....This does not mean that we are a family without problems. In fact, our divisions can be deep and painful. Language, skin color, and economic status - those who have a lot and those who don't have much - all can divide us. So it is good to look again at Jesus' story of the rich man and the poor man in Luke 16:19-31.

A rich man... In Jesus' day, folks thought that if a person was wealthy, it had to mean that God was pleased with that person...So a rich man would have been a "shoo-in" to get into heaven... They thought.

But Jesus told a story that turned this way of thinking totally upside down! The rich man, dressed in purple and linen (as a wealthy priest of Jesus' day would have dressed!), ended up not in heaven, but in a place of torment, in Hell.

Part of the torment was that he could see the poor man who had for years begged unsuccessfully right at the end of his driveway now up in heaven, enjoying all sorts of heavenly comforts.

The rich man - even though he was in hell - still had a "rich-man" attitude, so he called to Father Abraham, who would have been the ancestor of whom he was most proud, and told him to send the poor man (named Lazarus) down to him to help him. (He still seemed to think that others should be his servants, so his time in hell had not done him much good!)

After the rich man learned that he had been sent to hell because he had ignored the sufferings of the poor man just beyond his door, he thought of his brothers, still alive on earth, and asked if he could go back - just briefly - to warn them about how things would be if they didn't start living *their* lives differently. The rich man assumed - like so many of us do - that if some really dramatic, astonishing sign or occurrence could happen, then maybe people would be moved to make some changes.

God's answer to the rich man: Prophets have been sent... If your brothers don't heed the ones I have already sent to give them warnings, too bad for them.

It is tough... We live in a world where the disparity between those who have a lot and those who are poor is tremendous. Our state has mansions with indoor tennis courts and bathrooms for each of many bedrooms, and we have people who do not have even a room in which to live, or who cannot pay a strangling mortgage or high property taxes, who sink deeper into debt with each passing month.

Right now our nation's government has been "shut down" in a battle over health care. You may

be sick of all the political wrangling, but all of us can all certainly see that this is a battle over whether our government should try to provide accessible health care to people who don't have benefits or high salaries, or not. We tend to be quick to take sides; we want to be right, perhaps largely because we're scared of any changes ahead and what they may or may not mean for us.

But more basic than whether we think the Republicans are right or the Democrats are right is our call by our Lord to see what is important. I don't think that rich man in Jesus' story would care at all today whether any of us had food to eat or a way to see a doctor when we're sick. He was in life for himself and he was doing pretty well, or so he thought.

The late preacher Dr. Peter Gomes, in his book, *The Good Book*, spoke about the rich man, also known as "Dives," with these words: "Of Dives, who was rich in things of this world but did not use them wisely or acknowledge from whom they came, we can summarize in the words of an old storefront preacher; 'He had it, he 'bused it, he lost it, and he won't never get it back.'" (*The Good Book*, pp. 299-300)

In 1995, while I was a pastor in Great Neck, NY, -I attended a Martin Luther King service where I heard The Rev. Dr. James Forbes (who retired several years ago as head preacher of the Riverside Church in NYC) preach.

Dr. Forbes used an illustration which has spoken to me ever since and which I may have even shared with you already. But it bears repeating. Dr. Forbes told how there were eight children in his family when he was growing up, and how his mother, at dinnertime, would call everybody to the table and then, before anybody could eat, would ask, "Is anybody missing?" If any family member was not there, before anybody could eat a bite, a plate of food had to be made up for the one who was missing, and set in the oven to be kept warm. This was part of the ritual of this family. Only after food had been set aside for those who weren't there could the others dig in.

Dr. Forbes then went on to suggest that perhaps God is asking, as we partake of OUR bounties and have our celebrations, "Is anybody missing? Is anybody hungry? Have you set a plate aside for the others in this family who may need to eat?" (pause)

We belong to God through Jesus Christ. To belong to a group means to be included, to be missed when you're not present, to be counted, to be considered. When you belong to a church, you are counted: on the membership rolls, in the committee meetings; your money is counted and counted on; your vote is counted... And hopefully, when you are ill or laid up, you can count on someone else in your church to call you up and see what you need, to visit you, to care about you.

Today, as we remember that we are part of the large family of Christians throughout the world, we do well to open our eyes to the fact that many Christians are being persecuted or even killed this year. Christians in Egypt, Nigeria, India, Bangladesh, and Iran are some of our brothers and sisters who have experienced violence in the past month. On a different scale, many are hungry, even right here in the town of Winsted. Many more are hungry for meaning in their

lives, hungry to feel part of something, hungry to believe that they are not invisible to others. The poor man Lazarus might as well have been invisible every day when the rich man, aka Dives, passed him by. Through Jesus, the results of their lack of interaction and the rich man's refusal to even notice the poor man's needs have become a wake-up call for us.

Let this be a warning. God's view of life and people is WAY larger than ours! And God has told us plainly that God is concerned for anybody who is powerless or outcast in life. God wants God's people to live well by helping those who are poor, rejected by others, or suffering. The mandate could not be clearer. It is our choice – just as it was that rich man's brothers' choice – whether to *hear* it or not, and then whether or not to let it make a difference in the way we go through life.

The Christian path is not an easy one. It can be really hard to help others. People will take advantage of efforts to help and they often seem unappreciative and undeserving. But so are we all, in our own ways, undeserving and unappreciative of what God has done for us. Our challenge is to be obedient to what Jesus has told us God wants us to do. Jesus has showed us what is important to God: that we notice and try to use what we have been given to help those who are having trouble making it through life.

Remember: Like those five brothers in the story who were still living, the choice is ours and ours alone, every day. If you get disheartened, remember the counsel of Psalm 37: "Do not fret because of the wicked; do not be envious of wrongdoers, for they will soon fade with the grass, and wither like the green herb. Trust in the Lord, and do good..." May we hear the message of the Lord, and let God lead us to blessed and everlasting Life. Amen.