

**Indispensable Wit(h)nesses: You Need A VIP - Lazarus**  
**Luke 16:19-31**  
**14<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost**  
**September 6, 2009**  
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**First Christian Church**  
**Omaha, Nebraska**

I want to let you in on a little secret about preaching: Preachers have to decide which character in a text all of us are to identify with. So, are we the rich man whose life begins heavenly but ends in hell? That's the tact preachers usually take; except I hardly know anyone who thinks they're rich—our nation's wealth notwithstanding. Or, are we Lazarus, the only character in any of Jesus' parables, given a name? But then, few, if any of us, have ever found ourselves out on the street as homeless beggars!

This leaves Father Abraham, which makes no sense at all. But this also leaves the 5 brothers, whom the rich man would like to warn to keep out of Hell. This is it! Jesus told this parable to be a warning light to all "brothers" or "sisters" of the faith who think they can ignore the poor!

Well, our first reaction to Jesus' parable is to think God despises the rich. Except this isn't the point of the parable at all. Sure, the rich man wears Armani suits, fancy Italian shoes, owns the finest home security system and lives in a gated community! But, ironically, it isn't all the trappings of wealth that sink him; even if gospel-writer Luke continually

warns of the dangers of wealth, saying things like, “Woe to you, rich!” in his Sermon on the Plain! Remember! This is the same Luke who, in the Book of Acts, lauds wealthy Lydia, whose business was trading in the same purple this rich man wore, and gave herself to Christ at Philippi! She’s Exhibit A of the old saw, “It isn’t money, but *the love of money* which gets you into trouble.” No, it isn’t wealth that got the rich man a ticket on the bullet train to Hell. It’s something else. But what could it be?

Maybe it’s how the rich man used his wealth: Maybe he was some kind of 1<sup>st</sup> first century Bernie Madhoff. You know: the Wall Street tycoon and former chair of the NASDAQ stock exchange, who built a pyramid scheme so large it would have made the Egyptian pharaohs green with envy! But there’s nothing in the parable to suggest the rich man bilked others out of billions of dollars. Jesus never says a peep about how the rich man acquired his wealth! So much for any chicanery or fiduciary irresponsibility! So, what landed the rich man in Hell?

Well, even if Jesus didn’t actually come right out and say wealth is evil—he came very close—Jesus understood its power, a power that deeply affected the rich man. Look at how Jesus always talked about money! Except for the kingdom of God, Jesus talks about money more than anything else. This is why I always chuckle to myself when people complain that all churches ever do is talk about money. We’re only following Jesus’

precedent! Today's text follows a whole series of Jesus' parables about money: the Lost Coin, the Lost Son (who also lost his shirt), The Dishonest Steward and so forth.

The other thing that strikes me about Jesus and money is his profound respect for it. He doesn't say "You cannot serve God and your career," or a hundred other things. He says "You cannot serve God and money!" Jesus singles out money. Jesus knows good and well how money has near god-like qualities. This says to me: Jesus knew good and well the love of money and what it can buy is a competitor for people's hearts. Leave it to Jesus to identify the elephant in the room!

This is where the rich man comes in. It wasn't his wealth that got him into trouble. It was what he let his wealth do to him. He got seduced by its power. It blinded him to Lazarus' condition. The rich man never saw Lazarus. To the rich man, Lazarus was a non-entity, a Nobody, a nothing!

It's happened to all of us. We pull up to a street corner and see a homeless person holding up a sign for food. What do we do? I know what I do: I look away. This is my guilt. I feel I should do something, but don't.

But I also know I turn my eyes away because, frankly, I wish these folks would just disappear. I'd rather not be bothered. They're a blemish on the landscape. They're dirty, unkempt, with stringy hair and missing teeth.

It's like what Reverend Ike, who preached the prosperity gospel used to say, "The best thing you can do for the poor is not be one of them."<sup>1</sup>

But I have a sneaky suspicion our turning away and ignoring the poor condemns us. The same is true of the rich man. As one commentator puts it, "the rich man's sin wasn't that he removed Lazarus from the gate. The rich man's sin wasn't that he objected to Lazarus eating the bread crumbs off his table. The rich man didn't kick Lazarus while passing him by. The rich man wasn't deliberately cruel to Lazarus. The rich man's sin was that he never noticed Lazarus, that he accepted him as part of the landscape and simply thought it perfectly natural and inevitable that Lazarus should lie in pain and hunger while he wallowed in luxury. The lure of money has the power to make us blind. So, it wasn't what the rich man did that got him into Hell; it's what he didn't do."<sup>2</sup>

You see, the Christian faith is all about relationships, and the scriptures are clear: our relationship to God is directly affected by our relationship to others, in particular to the poor. Jesus says it in Matthew, "*As you did it to the least of these, you did it also to me.*" When people ignore the poor, they ignore Jesus. It was the rich man's blind casualness about Lazarus that condemned him. He never noticed the poor, starving soul, sitting at his doorstep.

This is why our identification with the rich man's 5 brothers in Jesus' parable is so important. Do we hear the rich man's warning from Hell that we need our eyes open to the poor, that by ignoring the poor, we're ignoring God? Do we have a Lazarus in our lives? Are we involved in helping some poor person lift themselves out of poverty, or just standing on the sidelines?

The superstar of caring in our lifetimes, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, put it best: "It is very fashionable to talk about the poor...unfortunately it is not as fashionable to talk to the poor."<sup>3</sup>

Well, we all probably have enough sins of omission stacked up when it comes to helping the poor to leave us feeling guilty forever. Truth is: few if any, of us have a Lazarus in our lives. Hopefully, through our upcoming series on Urban Poverty the next few weeks, this will change. As Fred Craddock, our greatest Disciple preacher of the last two generations once remarked, "It's easier to feel guilty than to be responsible."<sup>4</sup>

The real sadness of neglecting, dismissing, and being blind to the poor is how it finally prevents us from experiencing God's kingdom right now. Preacher Barbara Brown Taylor puts it this way in connection to our text:

There is very little guilt in this story. As far as I can tell, the rich man does not feel badly about anything except the place where his life of luxury has landed him...But remember this story is for us, not against us. Jesus may have enjoyed snatching knots in the tails of his money-loving listeners,

but I would be surprised if that were all he wanted. Even when he got angry, he got angry for a reason, usually because he could not stand the way people loved the things they could get for themselves better than the way they loved the things God wanted to give them. They were satisfied with linen suits and sumptuous feasts when God wanted to give them the kingdom. They were content to live in the world with beggars when God wanted to give them brothers and sisters. They were happy to get by with the parts of the Bible that backed up their own ways of life when God wanted to give them a new life altogether.

What they do not seem to know—what we still do not seem to know—is that we are the victims of our own way of life. When we succeed in cutting ourselves off from each other, when we learn how to live with the misery of other people by convincing ourselves that they deserve it, when we defend our own good fortune as God’s blessing and decline to see how our lives are quilted together with all other lives, then we are the losers. Not because of what God will do to us, but because of what we have done to ourselves. Who do you think fixed that chasm in the story? Was it God or the rich man? Sometimes I think the worst things we ever have to fear is that God will give us exactly what we want.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Peter Gomes, “What You Hear Is What You Get: Lazarus and Dives,” *Strength For the Journey: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living*, NY: Harpers, 2004, p. 241.

<sup>2</sup>This is a paraphrase from William F. Barclay, “The Gospel of Luke” *New Daily Study Bible*, Westminster:

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John Knox Press, 1975, p. 214.

<sup>3</sup>Shane Claiborne, "Foreward," *Make Poverty Personal: Taking the Poor Seriously as the Bible Does*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009, p. 11

<sup>4</sup>Comment made during Bible study at the 1973 General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples) in Cincinnati.

<sup>5</sup>Barbara Brown Taylor, *Bread of Angels*, Cambridge: Cowley, 1997, p. 112, as found in *Pulpit Resource*, Sept. 26, 2004, p. 56.