



Sermon Series: “A Visit to the Good Physician”  
**“The Other Lazarus”**

Preaching Text: Luke 16:19-31  
29 September 2013: 19<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
FUMC of Arlington, Texas 76011

19 “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. 20 And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, 21 who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. 22 The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. 23 In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. 24 He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.’

25 But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. 26 Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’ 27 He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house— 28 for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ 29 Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ 30 He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ 31 He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead’ “ (Luke 16:19-31).

In this parable the main difference we see between the rich man and Lazarus is that one is rich and the other is poor. How rich was the rich man? The text tells us that he “dressed in purple and fine linen and feasted sumptuously every day.” He dressed the part of royalty and we all know people who spend a small fortune on clothing. Perhaps we chose our apparel so people will appreciate the quality people we are. Most Americans hold this view. In a 1985 University of Michigan study, Americans tend to believe that people’s social status reveal their true worth (John E. Tropman’s study cited in Dan Flanagan’s unpublished sermon, *What Does it Take to Convince Us?*, 1 October 1995).

Furthermore the rich man “feasted sumptuously every day,” which means he ate every day like it was Thanksgiving. So could it be that his sin was that he dresses too well and ate too much? Did this conduct land him “in Hades?” The text only hints—it never comes right out and tells us.



How poor was Lazarus? Each day he lay at the rich man's gate. This may mean that he had a handicap condition. His job was to flop down each day and beg. Someone dumped him at the gate each morning and picked him up at the end of the day—perhaps? He was covered in sores and wished daily “to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table.” Lazarus was in such bad shape that he couldn't even fight off the dogs that came to lick his sores. The rich man was rich; and Lazarus was poor. The text never gives any moral history or ethical traits of the two. It only mentions economic status.

Lazarus was poor and the rich man was rich. We see a great gap between them in life. But—suddenly at death they momentarily become equals. Then the story shares each man's eternal fate. The angels carry Lazarus away to be with Abraham, while the rich man died and was buried and went to Hades—or Hell. Did their fates hinge on the fact that one was rich and one was poor? Was this Luke's way of reminding people what Mary sang in the *Magnificat*? Do you remember this radical song, seemingly quaint verse, we hear at Christmas?

**[God] has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty (Luke 1:51-53).**

Or remember Jesus' words to the rich and poor in the Sermon on the Plain?

**Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.  
Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.  
But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.  
Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.  
Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep (Luke 6:20-21, 24-26).**

What do we make of all this? I am not certain but I think two things come into play here. The first is what the Bible describes as “Deuteronomic theology.” This kind of theology tries to make clear why people either prosper or suffer. The thinking goes that if people live well, then God blesses and if people stray from virtue, then God either curses or exposes sinners to evil's penalty. The Pharisees and other self-



perceived righteous folk simply assumed that because people were rich then God blest them and if poor then God cursed them. These “righteous ones” justified neglecting other’s needs by a kind of twisted theological thinking. Jesus never said to ignore the poor—not once!

A second thing that comes into play is that the way Jesus tells the parable. The rich man is not so much condemned because he was rich, but rather because he failed to see a person in need right before his very eyes. That the rich man failed to see Lazarus positioned by his gate day after day after day after day . . . . Good stewards see the world in a sort of way to make a difference in the lives of those for whom Christ also died.

A new way of seeing is what Jesus desires for us. To be in faith—to be a faithful steward—is to see things the way Jesus would want us to see things. The psychiatrist Robert Coles tells of going as a student in New York City to see Dorothy Day at the Catholic Worker soup kitchen where she was serving. Someone directed Coles to room where Dorothy Day sat at a table with another woman. Coles waited impatiently for Day and describes the scene:

I found myself increasingly confused by what seemed to be an interminable, essentially absurd exchange taking place between the two middle-aged women. When would it end—the alcoholic ranting and the silent nodding, occasionally interrupted by a brief question, which only served, maddeningly, to wind up the already over-talkative one rather than to wind her down? Finally, silence fell upon the room. Dorothy Day asked the woman if she would mind an interruption. She got up and came over to me. She said, “Are you waiting to talk to one of us?” One of us: with those three words she had cut through layers of self-importance, a lifetime of bourgeois privilege, and . . . told me . . . what she herself was like (Robert Coles, *Dorothy Day: A Radical Devotion*, Addison-Wesley, 1987, p. xviii).

In Dorothy Day’s humility we see a way Jesus wants us to look at others. For this reason Jesus tells the parable about the rich man who could not see beyond his clothes closet or his banquet table. To be a human being is to spy things just a little beyond our front gate. Jesus wants us to look at others in this way.

Sometimes folks ask me what constitutes being a good steward. Good stewards



peer out from their houses, through their fences and their gates, and notice to what and to whom God wants us to attend. Literally, we do not have people lying at our gate. But as stewards, as managers of what God has given us, God wishes for us to attend other's needs—both nearby and far away. As stewards we manage the gate at our front door because this is what disciples, acting the part of stewards, do. If you want to know whether God considers you a good steward or not then ask: “Do I help care for the person at my gate?” Of course, some might also ask: “Do I see those in need at my gate?” Amen.

David N. Mosser, FUMC, Arlington, Texas 76011