

“A Drop of Water”
September 25, 2016
Luke 16:19-31

Island Heights UMC, Island Heights, NJ

"There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores.

The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side.

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.'

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. 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.'

He said, 'Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house—for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.'

Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.'

He said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.'

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.'"

Introduction

We have been discovering these past several weeks that it is one parable after another in the Gospel of Luke. So, we have these treasured stories told by Jesus that get his teaching across in unique but unsettling ways.

You might think today's story is about the perils of luxury and wealth. Or maybe there's something in the parable to stoke the fires of class warfare. But you must go deeper than the surface value of this passage. It goes beyond the age-old story of the haves and the have-nots, and past making a point about privilege. It gets down to a core problem of humanity. It is ultimately about disconnection; our disconnection with each other and our disconnection with God.

Of the four gospels, Jesus's mission to the outsiders is most clear in Luke where he is always fighting for the powerless, the nobodies, the despised and the diseased, the troubled and the troublemakers—in short, the messed up people; the ones who are overlooked, simply ignored, treated as if they do not matter in this life or the next. In today's parable, Jesus goes after this. And it's a story that begins with contrasts.

Vivid Contrasts

Vivid Contrasts. There's a rich man and a poor man. Their lives are completely opposite.

"There was a rich man," Jesus says, *"who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day."* Living like royalty; that's what purple garments symbolize. And he is eating like a king; because he can.

Meanwhile, *"At his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores."* It's a man who knows he'll never be royal; his clothes are drab, and his food is found in the garbage put out near the gate of the rich man's house close to where he sleeps. A steady flow of friends and relatives likely passes him on their way in for visits with the rich man, while the only company he keeps is the menacing wild dogs that come around to lick his sores. He may be at the gate of wealth but the distance between him and the rich man is established and maintained.

But there is one more vivid contrast worth noting: one man is named, the other is not. The poor man's name is Lazarus; a common name of the day. Lazarus is the Greek form of the Old Testament Hebrew name Eleazar, which means *"God is his help."*

They Both Die

Then the parable literally takes a morbid turn. As Jesus tells it, they both die; a reminder of the inescapable fact of mortality and our eventual death. The great equalizer takes us all. And a six-foot hole in the ground is the same for the rich and the poor.

And yet, our tale of contrast continues. Because in this story, after their death, they move off in different directions.

"The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side."

Who is Abraham? The one who is known as the *"Father of our faith."* He happens to be the root of three major world religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. To Abraham, God's promise was made that he would have as many descendants in the faith as there are stars in the sky and grains of sands on the beach. A popular euphemism for heaven at the time of Jesus was the *"bosom of Abraham."* The place of the righteous. There, you find Lazarus.

Meanwhile, the rich man is in Hades. What is Hades? It's the name of the Greek god of the underworld, and now the place with the same name. Some say it's hell, some say Gehenna, and others Sheol. One thing is certain: it's a place where you will die from thirst. And it's where you find the rich man.

Agony

It's a place of agony. The one-time rich man calls 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."*

There he is in Hades calling out, addressing Lazarus by name—probably for the first time—for a drop of water; all he wants is just *one* drop of water; *just one*.

But Abraham draws no water. Instead he draws one more stark contrast, *“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.”*

And with that, the reversal is complete. At one time there was a chance for relationship; they were so close. But now a great distance has been set between them. The distances that grow between us create agony.

The Distances Between Us

Abraham says to the rich man, *“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.”*

He said, “Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house—for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.”

Abraham replied, “They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.” This means they have the Word of God. Everything we ever needed to live in harmony is found in here.

He said, “No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.”

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.”

And therein lies the question of our faith. Do we believe? Or have we grown distant from God? Distance creates an unquenchable thirst, a thirst so bad you will beg for even just one drop of water. That is the agony we suffer as human beings, resulting from separation and alienation.

But the good news is that there *is* water available. It's called the LIVING water. It's the reality of Jesus Christ who enters humanity as Jesus of Nazareth and flips everything on its head causing reversals like what we see in this parable, and all through the Word of God, and in the everyday lives of those who follow him and know him as Lord. And through the reconciling act of Jesus Christ on the cross, God is closing the distance between us.

What We Are Called To

So, where does this leave us? Well, how many times do we hear the same thing from Jesus? It's the message that comes in light of the life we have been leading. It's the word that reverses and resets our course. And the word is: Repent. Turn around. *Turn now*; the time is at hand, because the kingdom of God is near. There is something called the kairos moment, meaning “this is it”—the time is now. While there is concern about what will happen to us after we die, the more pressing issue is how we will live in the present with each other and in relationship with God considering the fact that with Jesus the kingdom of God has broken into our world.

We have a deep need within us to be reconciled with the Creator. We also have a need to live in harmony with each other. Despite our current distractions and the work of darkness that divides us as fellow human beings, we have a need and desire to be at one with each other. All of humanity is created in the image of God, and to understand to some degree the nature of the Three-in-One God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy

Spirit, is to understand that three person loving community known as the Trinity and mirror it ourselves.

So we must eliminate the distance between us and the divine, and we must eliminate the distances between us and our fellow human beings. We must carefully consider who are we excluding; who are we overlooking, dismissing, forgetting about, ignoring, pretending does not exist, or cutting down to less than human. Who did Jesus come to rescue, to liberate, to comfort? Who did he come to champion? If we continue to ignore them, are we not ignoring Jesus himself? Jesus said, "When you gave them clothing, when you gave them food and a drink of water you were giving this to me. And when you did not," Jesus says, "were you not ignoring me?" Always remember, when we minister to others we are ministering to Jesus.

Lazarus. He's not easy to look at; those sores and all. But his name is Lazarus, which means "*God is his help*," and his day of deliverance comes. Jesus is like Lazarus. He's not easy to look at on that cross, wounds and all. But God is his help. And his place at the center of the universe is his destiny. And lest we find ourselves at a great distance from God in a place where, because of endless thirst, we beg for even just one drop of water, our time is now to turn and close the gap between us and God, and between us and others. Amen.