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The National Presbyterian Church

Facts and Faith

Luke 16:19-31

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In our sermons through the summer we're looking together at the stories that Jesus loved to tell that we call parables. In the pages of scripture (within the gospel accounts of Jesus ministry) there are over 40 of these stories told by Jesus. Many of them are about the world of nature – the world “out there,” the world around us, because Jesus believed, as did many faithful Jews, that when God created the universe, when he created material matter, the physical stuff of life, he imbued it with spiritual meaning, with spiritual truth; so that the Psalmist could write words like these in Psalm 19: “*The heavens declare the glory of God. Day to day pours forth speech there are no words yet their voice goes out through the whole earth.*” Jesus believes that the universe is speaking and he picks up on this as he tells some of his stories.

So some of Jesus' stories are about nature. And most of the others are about relationships – about relationships because Jesus is passionate about something called *the Kingdom of God*. The reign of God over us, and the realm or community of God around us, that God longs to establish under His reign. So it's both the relationship that we have with God that he's concerned about and the relationship that we have with those who are in the Kingdom, our brothers and sisters in Christ, our fellow citizens of the Kingdom of God. And Jesus uses the very imperfect relationships of human life to teach about some of those divine and spiritual relationships. And today's story is one of those relationship stories: a parable that Jesus tells about relationships.

The primary relationships in today's story are between (1) a rich man, whose name we do not know, and (2) a poor man whose name Jesus tells us (his name is Lazarus) and (3) God, who is represented by the quintessential faithful person in the Old Testament whose name is Abraham. So we have a rich man, a poor man, and God-represented-by-Abraham.

The story begins by telling us that the rich man feasted sumptuously in his house. He has much food to eat. He has a place to live in. He has a big house, and around this house there seems to be a fence or a wall of some kind that has a gate.

At this gate a poor person named Lazarus has taken up “residence.” He is so poor, so hungry, so starving, so sick, so filled with sores that he really cannot move. He's on the point of death. The rich man knows Lazarus is there, but he's oblivious to him. That is, in the story we're told

that the rich man knows Lazarus's name but Lazarus's presence at his gate really doesn't change the rich man's demeanor or his action in any way.

In fact, Jesus says that the dogs treat this man, Lazarus, better than the rich man does. We don't know if the dogs belong to the rich man or to somebody else. They seem to be taken care of. They get crumbs from their master's table and they come and they lick Lazarus's wounds, and this may seem to us to be rather gross (to lick the wounds of this poor man sitting there) but they're doing so out of love and compassion – and those of who have pets know that pets have this amazing ability to know how we feel. Sometimes we know that they understand that we're blue, that we're down, that we're sick, that we're sad. And they show us love. And Jesus' implication is that this rich man doesn't even show to the poor man anything like the love that the dogs show. Lazarus is so poor, so hungry, so starving, so sore, so sick that he dies. And then the rich man dies, too and death is this great leveler, except in the story it's not quite level.

Lazarus goes up to heaven and he is with Abraham, but the rich man goes down to the other place. He goes down to the place of torment. He goes to hell, and he is suffering there but he still doesn't quite "get" how serious the situation is. He still thinks that he's somehow in control of life and that just as in life he was able to control people like Lazarus, he could control him even now.

So in this place of torment he looks up, and sees Abraham. He says, "*Abraham, Abraham I'm suffering down here. That man, Lazarus, send him down to cool off my tongue, I'm hot, and I'm bothered. Send him my way to be my helper as if he's still his servant.*"

And Abraham says, "*Sorry can't do that. There's a gulf between you and me and I can't cross over and you can't come to me.*" Too late for that I'm afraid, he says, just too late.

So the rich man scratches his head. He begins to realize that he's in more trouble than he had at first thought, and begins to come to his senses and to exercise a little compassion toward his family: he realizes that his family is in trouble, too. He has five brothers and he wants to warn them about what's going to happen. He gets out of his own narcissistic self and begins to think of others and he says, "*Abraham, Abraham I need to do something to help my brothers. Maybe what they need is a miracle. That's what they need. If only they had an incontrovertible fact to convince them that the life they live is not all that there is, well, then they will believe.*" So, he says to Abraham: "*See that man Lazarus? Send him back from the dead and when they see him then they will believe.*"

And Jesus brings his story to a conclusion by saying, "Oh no, no they won't." Even if they get a miracle it will make no more difference than a car wreck. You know what happens when we see a car wreck on the road we slow down for about five minutes, ten minutes and then all the cars pick up speed again. We say we're not going to drive like that but then I at least, maybe not you, but I go back to driving exactly the way I was before. So even when you see something concrete and real, all too often it makes an impact merely for a moment, but then that impact disappears. And in the story, Jesus says (through Abraham), "Even if they see a man rise from the dead they will not believe." They know it. They know Moses and they know prophets but they've chosen not to do it. They know it, but they don't do it.

And with that, the story comes to an end, leaving us – which of course is Jesus intention; this is exactly what’s going on in almost all of the stories—with all kinds of questions that we need to pursue. Sometimes we’re left with more questions than answers. Jesus stirs up the crowd and I hope you have in your heart and mind a number of those same questions arising from the story.

One of the questions that arise, of course, has to do with suffering in this world with people like Lazarus. There are many people who say “I can’t believe in God because of all the suffering in the world. Will that suffering ever be put right?”

Well, I don’t think it’s Jesus’ central intention in this story to deal with this question, but what we do know from the story is that everything is okay with Lazarus in the end. It’s all okay in the end with the one who is sick and suffering and has no help. In other words we can safely imply from the story that God—the God we know made known in Jesus Christ – will make sure there is no unfairness or no injustice which lasts through all eternity.

So that may be one of the questions that we ask of ourselves. Or what about this one? What about the fact that Jesus mentions eternal torment? What about the whole issue of hell-fire and brimstone? Is that what’s really ahead? Is this who God really is – designing gruesome activities for people for all eternity?

Well the quick answer when it comes to those descriptions of hell-fire and brimstone is this: that the most gruesome pictures of such torment always arise in the pages of scripture in the most highly symbolic pieces of literature.

- The book of Revelation, for example, is what we call “apocalyptic literature,” and it is *designed to be symbolic and graphic*. To put it another way, if you read it literally then you will be misreading it!! You will be missing God’s intention.
- In the same way, we need to remember that the stories that Jesus tells are just that: stories!! And, as with any good story teller, Jesus constantly gives life and color to his stories by using hyperbole and exaggeration. This is how he drives home his point. He does this repeatedly, in all kinds of different ways.

So when it comes to the hell fire and the brimstone in Jesus’ stories, I, at least, would “hang a little bit loose” on the details, and say “don’t press them,” otherwise we might misread and misinterpret the scripture.

But having said that there’s something in what Jesus says here within our story and elsewhere that we cannot escape so lightly. And that is the fact that this story is not just about hell-fire and brimstone, but *it’s about accountability*. **It is about accountability, and in 40-percent, that’s four- out-of-ten of Jesus parables the issue of ultimate accountability before God is central to the story.**

Ultimate accountability before God is central to the story. We’ve been made in the image of God. We’ve been given the ability to choose and we will stand before our maker as those who are accountable. Many people just don’t like this. They’ve tried to get rid of this from Jesus’ teaching, as if you can rip that part of Jesus’ teaching out of Jesus.

In fact if you go back to the 1800s, or, further, to the 1700s, you'll find many intellectuals trying to do this with Jesus (and Thomas Jefferson was among them). Many of the great German and British theologians of the 1800s were among them. They tried to rip out that section of Jesus' teaching saying something like this: *"What we want is just to preserve the really sublime part of Jesus life and teaching. The rest of what we find in the gospels has been added in by Jesus' disciples. They were more ignorant than Jesus. They were embellishing the story, but the real Jesus, the core, the kernel of Jesus, doesn't have all that extra stuff within it."*

And so they tried to get rid of it and say we can really find the real Jesus without that stuff. They did this until the turn of the 20th century when a great, remarkable man came along whose name is Albert Schweitzer. Many of you may know of Albert Schweitzer because he was a great medical doctor who started a hospital in Lamborene, in Gabon in West Africa. Schweitzer was renowned for this work, and in 1952, at age 77, he gained a Nobel Peace prize for it. For this he was remarkable – but at the turn of the 20th century, he was remarkable for something else as well: he was also one of the leading New Testament theologians in the world. And while he was no fundamentalist, he took on those scholars and said something like this:

"Not so easy my friends. Given what we know about the ancient world, and what we know about ancient Judaism, and what I surmise as I read the story of Jesus, the fact is that the picture we have of Jesus in the New Testament gospels is consistent from the beginning to the end and does not arise simply because of what "others" later wrote about Jesus. The picture is consistent with what we would expect of a first century Jew living in a milieu in which we know that many people believed in the importance of the end of time ("eschatology"). What you see is what you get; what you see is who he was."

Schweitzer stunned the academic world at that point. Admittedly, Schweitzer didn't like the Jesus he'd discovered (!), but his academic integrity was impeccable. In the end he lost his faith, but what he pointed out is critical. That we don't have the right, if we want to follow Jesus, to pick and choose the bits we like and the bits we don't, and still call ourselves His followers. The issue of accountability is repeated so often by Jesus that it cannot be dismissed lightly; the sense that the end of life matters, and that one day we will come face to face with our God and we'll be held accountable. If we remove this line of thinking just because we don't like it, then we obliterate the only Jesus that we have.

In our passage, in particular, through the story Jesus spells out three areas of particular accountability. That is, the story teaches that (1) we are accountable for our money; that (2) we are accountable for the care of the poor, and (3) we are accountable to listen to God. Perhaps you remember that many of Jesus' parables include the words "those who have ears to hear, listen." We are accountable for (3) listening to God. We are accountable for (2) the poor and we are accountable for (1) the use of our money. I would like us to think very briefly about each of these areas just now beginning with the issue of our money.

Stewardship: Accountable for our money. In Christian circles when we speak about accountability for our money, we call it stewardship. We are stewards of what has been entrusted to us. You and I are pass-through accounts. God's money is being channeled through us. It's only here for a season. It flows into us and out from us and what happens when it's here with us is up to you! We have choices to make in faith before God as to what we do with what we have. This is a way of looking at life which makes a profound difference: *that what I have is mine – but it's not. That is, it's entrusted to me, but only for a season.* Is this how you think of what you have? Entrusted to you for a season. The rich man in the story just never thought about it that way. In fact I'm not even sure he thought about it at all. He just went on with his life with what he had and saw it as his. He was in absolute control now, in this life, and he still thought he was later. We may say to ourselves "*Well isn't it a bit much to think that God should take time, at the end of time to think about how we use our money? Doesn't this somehow trivialize or demean God, to think that God should be interested in such things?*"

I don't think so! In fact, what I'd reply to that kind of statement is this: That in our world today, we spend a great deal of time, we invest a great deal of time and energy and training in making sure that people and organizations use what has been entrusted to them properly. The whole accounting profession is set up for this; the whole world of business, private business, public companies, non-profits, churches, the government around about us are literally "held accountable," spending time, energy, effort on accounting for their resources. Everybody is held to account and if they cannot justify what they've done with what they've been given, what do we cry? We cry outrage! Scandal! Something's wrong! We need an inquiry! We need transparency! A huge amount of our secular energy is spent on this issue of accountability for resources entrusted to the care of people. It's true in the church. It's true in our church.

Some of you may not know, some of you may know and care, and some of you may not care much at all, but once a month the accounts of the church are available for the members of the church and for visitors of the church to look over. It's important in our organization every year to have a professional audit (we're in the middle of it right now) because what we do with what you give to God through the church matters.

From a secular point of view as well as a religious point of view. From a public point of view as well as a personal point of view. This accountability matters before God. And it is an essential part of Jesus' teaching: "You cannot," he says, "serve God and wealth." That is, you've been entrusted with what you have. Whatever it is. It's not whether it's much or little that matters. It's the attitude, not the amount that counts. It's for "whatever it is" that we are held accountable before God. It's not mine it's God's. My choices about it matter.

So that's part of what Jesus says when he speaks about accountability here and elsewhere. But he also goes on to say; that we are accountable to God for the poor. We who are rich are accountable to God for the poor.

Accountable for the Poor. This accountability clearly involves our use of money but it surely also involves our intellect as well. We're accountable to God, we who are rich, for the poor.

Most of us, if not all of us are rich. We may not think that way. We compare ourselves with Warren Buffet or with Bill Gates, as we're prone to do, and have a pity party. Compared to them we may feel terribly, terribly poor.

But let me tell you this: that if you earn over \$31,000 a year you're in the top 1-percent of people in the whole world. If you earn more than \$21,000 a year you're in the top 3-percent of people in the world. We are amongst the rich.

When we seek to find our identity within the story Jesus tells, we are clearly on one side and not on the other: we're the rich man! While there may be exceptions, this is the case for most of us here. And we've been given our resources, intellectual as well as financial for a purpose.

- (1) We're to take care of ourselves, to be sure, and our families. If we don't do that says the apostle Paul we worse than an unbeliever (1 Timothy 5:8).
- (2) We are to spread the word of God (like the women who used their resources to support Jesus and the disciples. See Luke 8:1-3). We are to establish places of worship like this place with what we have but we are also not to be consumed with ourselves alone but to care for others.
- (3) And we are to care for the poor, for the Lazarus' of this world. And this is critical.

Now we may well disagree as to how we're to do this and I actually think that that debate is healthy. How are we to do this? I'm not sure the scriptures give a single answer. In fact many Christians debate as to how we are to do this without causing more harm than good and there are some powerful books out there just now which speak about this subject. One is called, *Toxic Charity* (Robert Lupton). And a better one in my opinion is called, *When Helping Hurts* (by Steve Corbett, Brian Fikkert and David Platt). Great books to make you think about our responsibility together to care for the poor. So we may disagree as to how we are to do it, but we have no right to do nothing. No right to do nothing.

Jesus' point in the story was that the rich man could have done something. I mean he could have done something. He should have done something. And in doing nothing he was worse than the dogs that licked the sores on Lazarus. Just as in the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30), the man who does nothing incurs Jesus and God's wrath, so we've been called to do something.

I'm glad that I'm part of a congregation which together does something. We care for the poor. We care for the hungry. We care for the homeless. In fact our activity after church today is to care for the hungry and the homeless in a very small but really significant way – by putting fruit cups together for those who are hungry on our DC streets.

But what I'd suggest to you is that what we do as a church at the moment is just the tip of the iceberg compared to what we might be doing.

If I were to go back over my last three churches, that's going back 25 years, I'd have to tell you that none of them gave less than 20% of their operating budget to mission and

evangelism. We would have to do *five times as much* in our congregation to match that. We've begun, but we have a long way to go. Not merely giving handouts, but being involved in the lives of others to make changes that can be sustained. Both individually and corporately we are accountable to God not simply to pass by, nor simply to give handouts that may make the situation worse, but to use all we have (our intellect as well) to create changed lives.

The rich man didn't get this message, at least while he was alive. He didn't do it. But as he's lying there in torment he begins to realize that those he loves, his brothers, his family, they weren't getting it either. They're not into this business of accountability. And he wants to wake them up as he begins to wake up himself. And he thinks that in order to wake them up a miracle will do the trick – ***will get them to listen!!***

Accountability to Listen. So he says to Abraham, "*Send Lazarus back. Send Lazarus back. If they see a person who's been raised from the dead their lives will change. They'll listen!*" But Abraham says, "*Afraid not! That's not how it works. Even a seemingly incontrovertible fact will not necessarily breed faith. If they didn't listen to what God said through Moses in Scripture, then even a miracle won't get them to hear!*"

That is, God's passion for the poor, and God's passion for us to be generous with what we have, fills the pages of scripture. When Jesus (through Abraham) refers to Moses and the prophets in this story, he's referring to the Bible of his day. The Word of God is clear about our responsibility. Not necessarily about the details as to how we do what we do, but our responsibility is absolutely clear. We don't need a miracle to change our ways. We need "ears that hear the word of God" and the power of the Holy Spirit to bring conviction to our hearts and minds, that the message of Scripture is not just for and about people "back then," but it's for and about us. What we need is a conviction that our greatest joy will come by hearing and responding in accountable ways to God.

What I placed in the sermon notes insert in your bulletin, that I think each of you have, are the words of Moses and the prophets on our responsibility to care for the poor and the weak and to use our resources generously. If I were to have put down there all the verses that I could have turned to I think you'd have had four or five more pages than what we have there. So what I have are just some verses as Jesus would say from Abraham through Moses and the prophets to challenge us to think about who we are and what we are to do as those who have been given the word of God and are accountable. I'll read just a few of those verses.

- "Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land." Leviticus 19.
- "You shall not strip your vineyard bare or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and the alien."
- "Is not this the fast that I choose," says Isaiah. "Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own kin."

- And then Ezekiel the prophet: “This was the guilt of Sodom [He doesn’t in this case refer to sexual immorality for which Sodom was famous, but he says] she and her daughters had pride, excess of food and prosperous ease but did not aid the poor and needy.”

We know what God wants. It’s there in scripture. It’s there I think in our consciences as well. God holds us accountable, not because He’s out to get us, but because He treasures us. God’s accountability exists because you and I individually matter, and our greatest joy and fulfillment lies in finding God’s call and in responding.

1. God has spoken to us and speaks to us. Are we listening?
2. God comes to us when we are poor and weak in Jesus Christ and calls us to go to the poor and weak, too. Are we caring?
3. God has given us resources. We have much or we may have little compared to others around us. But the issue is this. How do we see these resources? Are they ours or God’s? Are we in control or is He?

These things matter. They matter eternally. For our joy, for God’s joy and for our ability to be followers of Jesus Christ as we live our lives before him today.

1. Robert Lupton , *Toxic Charity* (New York, HarperOne, 2011).
2. Steve Corbett, Brian Fikkert and David Platt, *When Helping Hurts* (Chicago, Moody Publishers, 2012).

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