

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, September 25, 2016
Rev. Andrew Reid
I Timothy 6:6-19; Psalm 91:1-6,14-16; Luke 16:19-31
“Getting personal”

As with the parable of the dishonest manager last Sunday, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus raises several rather thorny questions. So this will be a sermon in several, hopefully not too thorny parts.

Part one is a story that American theologian Donald Messer tells. It may capture the attitude of the rich man in the parable. It's the story of another rich man who was asked to contribute to a major financial campaign.

The urgent need and the compelling case were stated, and the appeal was made for his support. The man responded: 'I can see why you think I can give fifty thousand dollars. I have a very successful business and you probably think my lifestyle has all the signs of affluence. But there are some things you don't know. Did you know that my mother is in an expensive nursing home?'

Well, no, we didn't know that.

'Did you also know that my brother died, with almost no life insurance, and left a family of five?'

No, we didn't know that either.

'Did you know that my son is deeply religious, has gone into social work, and with a family to support makes less than the national poverty level?'

No, we hadn't realized that.

'Well then,' the rich man said, 'if I don't give a penny to any of them, what makes you think I'll give anything to you?'

Moving quickly along lest anyone think I am getting too personal. Part two. Decisions have consequences. The rich man in the parable made the decision not to do anything to alleviate Lazarus's suffering. By implication, that explains why, when he died and was buried, he ended up in Hades, Sheol, the place of the dead, where he was tormented. But when the poor man died, he was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham.

Now, we don't live with the same belief about the afterlife that prevailed when the Gospel writers plied their trade. It is actually possible to trace a clear change in belief about the afterlife between the earlier and the later New Testament writings. So I don't believe we should necessarily think that this parable gives us a literal portrayal of what happens after death.

But having said that, we might well conclude from the parable that decisions have consequences. And can have eternal consequences.

Part three. There is something unique in the four Gospels about this parable. The unique thing is that we are told the poor man's name: Lazarus. In fact, he is the only person in all of Jesus' parables whose name we are told. More to the point, we are told his name but not the name of the rich man. Why should this be? Why should Lazarus's name be so much more significant than the characters in the other parables – the loving father of the prodigal son, for example, or the shepherd who goes in search of the lost sheep, or the woman who searches for the lost coin? Could it be that the poor are so important to God that God knows them by name???

Maybe it could. After all, just think about what Jesus said about the poor.

- That the kingdom of heaven belongs to the poor in spirit, the kingdom of God to the poor: Matthew

5:3, Luke 6:20.

- That one of the signs that he was the Messiah was that the poor have good news brought to them: Matthew 11:5, Luke 4:18; Luke 7:22.
- That the way for a rich young man to have treasure in heaven was go, sell his possessions, give the money to the poor, and follow Jesus: Matthew 19:21; Mark 10:21; Luke 18:22.
- That we would always have the poor with us, and we can show kindness to them whenever we wish. Matthew 26:11; Mark 14:7; John 12:8:
- That when we give a banquet, we should invite the crippled, the lame, the blind, and the poor: Luke 14:13; Luke 14:21.
- And maybe most tellingly of all, that a poor widow who put two small copper coins into the Temple treasury actually gave more than the vast amounts wealthy people were putting in: Mark 12:43; Luke 21:3.

Part four, and this one is maybe a bit thorny. Last Sunday when we were thinking about the parable of the dishonest manager, I suggested that the parable was actually a parable of grace – the grace that the master showed when he forgave the manager who cheated him.

On Tuesday morning, the Lectionary Study Group reflected on the parable, and I told them of a colleague in ministry who is now retired. He told once me that in the last few years when he was preaching regularly, he always looked for grace in the text. And if he couldn't find grace in the text, he didn't waste time and breath preaching on it. That's certainly a provocative way of thinking and going about preaching, but I have to say I find it appealing.

Since the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ – John 1:17; and since sin has no dominion over us, because we are not under law but under grace – Romans 6:14; and since it is by grace that we have been saved through faith, as the free gift of God – Ephesians 2:8; it makes sense to me that in all our dealings with Scripture, we should always look for grace, for the free, undeserved, unearned, unmerited gift of the love and forgiveness of God.

Have you noticed? Of course you have noticed. How could anyone not notice that New St James and people in New St James have had a series of tough blows to deal with recently?

- The deaths of some much loved and much respected individuals;
- several people who have provided leadership and pastoral care having to step back from their positions for personal and family reasons;
- falls and accidents and medical challenges hitting several people;
- political and financial uncertainty in society;
- an awareness of growing need in society around us.

As people of faith, we place our trust in the care and compassion of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. But when so many hard things are thrown at us in such a short time, they shake us. They rattle us. They may even make us question our faith. And they make us long for the assurance of grace. They make the search for grace all the more urgent and pressing.

So where is the grace in today's text? Maybe it lies in the conclusion that riches, wealth, prosperity, affluence, all the material things by which the world outside the church measures success, do not and cannot save us.

It all comes down to what we do with the free, undeserved, unearned, unmerited gift of the love and forgiveness of God that God has entrusted to us. It all comes down to what we do with the call of God to follow Christ, to worship God and to serve others. And that is where it gets really personal.