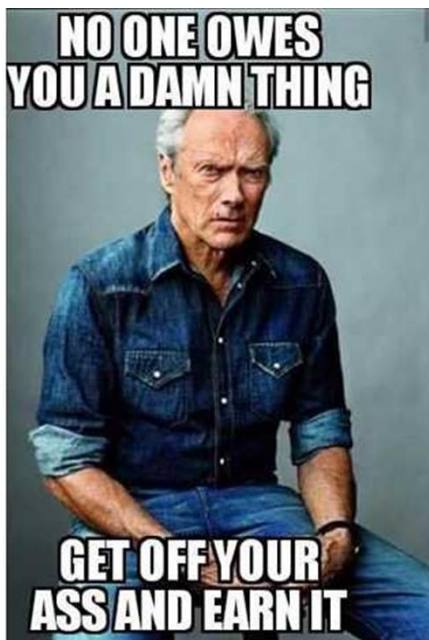


Proper 21C 2016 Sermon

Luke 16:19-31

Jesus said, "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.'"



There is a posting that has been making the rounds on Facebook recently. It is a picture of a scowling Clint Eastwood, with the words, "No one owes you a damn thing. Get off your ass and earn it."

Shortly after seeing that Facebook post, I started researching my sermon on today's Gospel, in which Jesus tells a parable about a rich man who feasted sumptuously each day and a poor man named Lazarus who sat at the rich man's gate every day and longed to be fed even the scraps from the rich man's table; but the rich man apparently does not pay any attention to Lazarus.

Now I suppose that if among the apocryphal gospels archaeologists still find from time to time there appeared a Gospel of Clint Eastwood, the rich man in this story would say to Lazarus, "No one owes you a damn thing. Get off your ass and earn it." The assumption being that Lazarus' situation was entirely the result of his own doing, or his laziness.

And to be honest, isn't that the way that you and I are often tempted to think of the homeless folk we see (if we have eyes to see them at all)? Isn't that the way you and I are tempted to think about those folk holding cardboard signs on the exit ramps of highways or at major intersections? "If they only got up off their butts, they could make a decent living."

After reading Jesus' parable, however, we can *clearly* see that the Gospel of Clint Eastwood could not be more radically opposed to the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus pays absolutely *no* attention to whether or not Lazarus was lazy or crippled or diseased or whatever. Worthiness is nowhere even mentioned. Lazarus was simply a human being in desperate need, and the rich man showed not an ounce of compassion. If a severely wounded man comes into the Emergency Room, the physicians and nurses do not ask whether he is worthy of healing. And yet, amazingly, I have at times heard church-going Christians propound the Gospel of Clint Eastwood as if it were the Gospel of Jesus. Some Christians try to temper the radical nature of the parable by hypothesizing conditions which Jesus never mentions. "Lazarus must have been one of the deserving or worthy poor people, if in the afterlife he ended up in the bosom of Abraham." Yet worthiness is not mentioned at all in the parable. Abraham does not say that Lazarus is to be accounted any more or less "worthy" than is the rich man. In fact, Abraham even calls the rich man "child," which we can take to mean that **both** men have intrinsic worth in the eyes of God. Worthiness is not the issue, but rather compassion, care, solidarity, and love.

How did the chasm get there, then? Was it placed there by God as a punishment for the rich man in the afterlife? More than one respected Biblical scholar points out that the "afterlife" as described in this parable is not meant to depict the exact nature of what happens after death. Professor David Lose writes: "This is a *parable*, after all, where metaphorical, exaggerated, even hyperbolic language is the norm... [T]oday's story... isn't about the afterlife at all, but rather is about our lives *right now*..." Dr. Lose argues that the chasm was something the rich man had been constructing himself throughout his life, and continues to construct in the afterlife. "Even in the afterlife the rich man continues to treat Lazarus as a non-entity, a servant who should fetch him some water or, failing that, be sent as a messenger to his brothers. In both his earthly life and in the life to come, the rich man refuses to see Lazarus as a person, a human, a fellow child of God, and so ignores him and his plight.

"And *seeing*, in [Luke's] Gospel, is a very big deal. Because before you can have compassion for people, you have to *see* them, acknowledging their presence, needs, and gifts, and above all their status as children of God [intrinsically] worthy of respect and dignity. This the rich man utterly fails to do. Which leads me to conclude that the chasm between them in this parabolic description of the afterlife is only a dramatization of the one that existed before, to the detriment of both, for no good [ever] comes from setting barriers between the children of God. And this may be Luke's point all along, less warning us about punishment in the

next life than urging us to the abundant life in *this* one that comes only in seeing those around us as God's beloved children deserving our care, attention, and fellowship."

Seeing the hundreds of thousands of refugees in our world; seeing those children of God who are of a different race or religion; seeing the homeless and desperately poor *right here in Canon City*, who are clearly visible **if** we have eyes to see. Seeing them all as children of God with inherent dignity, worthy of our compassion and acts of kindness.

My friends, it is something that is in **our** history, **our** DNA here at Christ Church. Decades ago, Loaves and Fishes was started on the back porch of our parish office. Although I was not there at the time, I am certain that the impetus for this ministry arose out of a true compassion for those in hunger and need in our community. I am certain that those who started that ministry did so because they had looked into the eyes of a fellow human being in need and had seen there a child of God just like them, each child of God uniquely created and gifted, each a member of the body of Christ without which the body – the Church of Jesus Christ – could not function completely. We at Christ Church in 2016 are presented with these same fellow human beings living in our community, many of them close neighbors, some just 3 blocks away at Villa Carina. They are the Lazaruses at **our** gates. They walk by here all the time. They walk along the streets of downtown, along the highway. They hang out at Veteran's Park and at the library. They show up at the Tuesday free luncheons at First Christian, and at our Laundry Love sessions each month. Do we *see* them? Truly **see** them? Or do we just pass them by, as the rich man in our Gospel passed Lazarus by? We may give food or money to Loaves and Fishes, but do we ever bother to look these hurting, hungry, sometimes desperate people in the eye and see there a human being with whom Jesus calls us into relationship?

The Gospel according to Clint Eastwood reflects the common American viewpoint that everyone has an equal chance of "making it" in this country. Episcopal priest and author Barbara Brown Taylor notes the huge blind spot that such an attitude reveals. She writes: "The great American myth is that anyone willing to work hard can win first prize. It might be true if everyone were standing at the same starting line when the gun went off, but that is never the case. Some start from so far back that they can run until their lungs burst and never even see the dust of the front runners.

"Those are the hardest cases, I think, people who have inherited poverty as surely as they have inherited brown eyes or curly hair, who hear the starting gun go off and do not even know which way to run. Not that it matters. They do not have the right shoes, cannot pay the registration fee, never got a copy of the rules, and are in terrible shape anyway. Other people look at them and think 'losers.'" ²

Let's admit it, my friends: you and I have had such thoughts more than once in our lives. Jesus' parable clearly shows how wrong such an attitude is, showing us that we are responsible for each other as fellow children of God, members of the same body, to use St. Paul's image.

Now, neither Luke nor Jesus likes to mention details in their stories that are superfluous, so we should ask ourselves, "What's the purpose of mentioning the dogs licking Lazarus' sores?" I would suggest that perhaps one message is this: showing compassion and love to those who are different from us (either economically, or racially, or by level of education, or social status) is not always easy or pretty. It sounds like Lazarus has open sores that are oozing, and dogs are licking the puss. Caring for our sisters and brothers in need is not always pleasant. Lazarus' sores may have smelled, he may not have had a bath in a while, or had toilet facilities to use, or any number of other conditions that we middle class folk find distasteful; Jesus calls us to have compassion anyway. As our collect today states, "O God, you declare your power chiefly in showing mercy and pity...", and if that is the character of God, we who are **children** of God should *imitate* that mercy and pity.

At our Regional Convocation yesterday, Bishop O'Neill stated, "We cannot afford to be siloed franchises. The Church must be mission-minded, mission-shaped, and mission-focused." One of the 4 areas of strategic focus of the Episcopal Church in Colorado is "Engaging Substantively with the Suffering of the World," which is defined as "bringing greater depth and substance to our witness to the gospel by moving beyond the practice of charity at arm's length and living into the transformational embrace of suffering which is what true love demands." Whenever we renew our baptismal vows, we renew our promise to "seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourself." My friends, we are doing this as we befriend and walk alongside those living at Villa Carina, our neighbors; we are doing this as we volunteer at Laundry Love and treat the guests with respect, dignity, and compassion, listening to their stories. If you have never volunteered at Laundry Love, I encourage each of you to do so at least once. I promise that you will be blessed, just as our forebears here at Christ Church were blessed by those in need when they started Loaves and Fishes so many years ago.

Which will we follow: the Gospel of Clint Eastwood or the Gospel of Jesus Christ? It is ours to choose. And let us not fool ourselves that they are in *any* way the same Gospel.

AMEN

¹ <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/09/pentecost-19-c-eternal-life-now/>

² Barbara Brown Taylor, "A Fixed Chasm," *Bread of Angels*, Boston: Cowley Publications, 1997, pp. 109-113