

Texts: Psalm 41:1-3; Luke 16:19-31

Subject: Lazarus and The Rich Man

Theme: The Chasm Between Us

Fourth Sunday in Lent, Mar. 14, 2021; Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven and our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

There's a saying that goes, "We are to love people and use things, but in our world so many love things and use people." I don't know who said it, but it seems true enough in my experience. How did we mess that up? There seems to be something that we value so highly - that it's worth throwing away a relationship, something gained by occasionally trampling on someone's dignity and personhood, and regularly looking past their and our own beloved-ness to obtain, own, and maintain.

In our family growing up, we had just enough to get by. There was more debt than savings, more campouts than vacations. With my father working just about all the time, mom raising 5 kids at home while working as a childcare provider for neighbors and cleaning homes on the side, they made it work. We wore hand-me-downs clothes and played with hand me down toys. We didn't live in a large city, but we knew others who had less than us. We learned to be grateful. Looking back, it's easy to see how without a strong support system, insurance, and help from extended family, one health crisis, one accident or disaster can sink a family just trying to get by today.

We can look at the casinos that dot the strip just a half mile from us today, or massive homes for sale here in Las Vegas, and know that there is tremendous wealth out there. And still, the number of homeless and hungry among us - which was high before March of 2020, has grown exponentially in the past year. The wealth gap that

existed during Jesus' ministry, has persisted through the millennia, and the chasm between us seems to only have grown in our lifetimes.

We know there is a housing crisis, right here in our neighborhood, and across this valley. We know it will get worse as the moratorium on evictions expire. There are shelters and agencies to help, each one struggling for funding to pay staff salaries and provide needed items and emergency relief. They can do so much, and yet struggle to work together at times. As the body of Christ in the world, we know in our heads and hearts that we are called to help alleviate the burdens of our neighbors when and where we are able. The word of the Lord given through Moses and the prophets attests to this:

You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt., (Ex. 22:21)

“Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow.” (Isaiah 1:17)

What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God., (Micah 6:8)

Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream., (Amos 5:24)

John the Baptist proclaimed it too:

“Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” (Lk. 3:11)

Jesus carries the message in his own body and walks it into the world in His ministry, proclaiming the present and coming Kin-dom of God, reminding and teaching:

“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...”

“But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High.”

And let's state for the record that the vast majority of us living in this nation, watching and worshipping here today *are the rich*. Ok, maybe we're not Jeff Bezos, or Sheldon Adelson, or Kardashian rich, but we have more relative wealth than families living a world away from here. Most of us are comfortable, and will not worry about where our next meal is coming from.

We keep all this in mind as we hear Jesus tell the story of the (unnamed) rich man and Lazarus. The rich man lived safely in a gated community - not his fault - maybe he was born there - we don't know that he put up the gate. He certainly had his own family and servants to provide for, and hosting the daily feast with his father and five brothers was hard work. His purple clothes were rare and very expensive, and he would have hated to get them dirty. Sure, he knew Lazarus by name. Lazarus didn't have clothes, in fact, his skin was broken with gross sores, and was failing. He didn't have a feast, but would have been happy with a few crumbs from the rich man's table. His healthcare system and his only companions were the street dogs that would come and lick his wounds. In time, both men's journeys came to an end. Lazarus was carried away, and the rich man was buried. In the place of the dead, the rich man, who was being tortured, cried out for Abraham to demand one more task to ol' Lazarus - give him

some work - make him a servant - to cool off the rich man. But the great reversal had already taken place.

Lazarus would not be commanded. The rich man had no authority in this place. Instead, he asked if Lazarus could go and warn the family of the rich man - so they would not be bound for the flames themselves. But, Abraham explained, the time for warnings was over and done. Did he miss the memo? Moses and the prophets, they called the people to act with justice, to give generously, to show compassion and mercy. Why did the rich man and his brothers not heed the call? They can't plead ignorance. Do you think that if there was one who rose from the dead they'd all of a sudden change?

Wealth isn't the enemy in the story, though it might sound that way on the surface. It's indifference and apathy that haunt us more. Human selfishness and the inability to see beyond our own nose is more deadly, and affects us all, whether we have means or struggle to get by. We are all more often concerned about what we have and the level of comfort we live in than the pain that is just outside our doors - just down the street at Baker Park, down Sherwood Ave, at Main and Foremaster, at D Street and Bonanza.

What does it mean to have empathy?¹ Empathy is "the ability to understand and share the feelings of another." Why could the rich man not once put himself in the shoes on the one who lay at his gate?

Why don't we?

¹ "Six Habits of Highly Empathetic People" accessed 3/13/21 at "https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/six_habits_of_highly_empathic_people1"

If we've never had anxiety about how we were going to pay a bill, buy groceries, or obtain medical care, it could be hard to understand what that would be like. If we fail to listen to the voices of those who are hurting, we will not learn what their experience is like. If we do not challenge prejudices and find the commonalities we all share, we'll continue to feel superior and make God's children out to be "other" or place blame. If we're not curious or concerned about the real day-to-day existence of our neighbors who struggle to survive, we will miss the opportunity to understand how to help, and there remains the chasm between us all. I don't know that there are any easy answers or solutions. I expect that as we gather for worship each week, and we hear these words of Jesus most of us are concerned - we all *want* to help those who are suffering. We *want* to share from our abundance. We know we have so much to give. But we are comfortable too, and this teaching may convict us. It reminds us of the ways we have failed to help, of the ways we cling to what makes us feel most secure, and how we are as guilty as the rich man of looking past those who lay at our gates.

Of course we work together to *share the heart of Christ in the heart of the city* and we have partners in ministry that serve with us, like Lutheran Social Services and our Senior meal program, Family Promise, Nevadans for the Common Good, Martin's MArt, the Nevada Homeless Alliance, Caridad and more.

But this story is not just a call for us to do more, give more, care more. This Word also reminds us of *who we are and of the God who loves us* and gives everything - from stars and trees and food and families - down to His own blood for us - and in it the freedom from our desires and selfishness and greed. Jesus is telling the story and teaching about Himself - He is the one who can bridge *the chasm between us* - the

chasm between our desires and our real need to be sustained in God's love; the chasm between our scarcity mindsets - thinking we'll never have enough or keep enough, or be enough - and the abundance of God's grace; the chasm between our privilege and pride and his powerful mercy and the faith that transforms us.

Jesus is stronger than our indifference. God is greater than our greed. In faith, we meet Jesus who steps in to heal the wounds of the world and the ones that are self-inflicted, reminds us that we are a part of God's own family, and opens the gates of the *kin-dom* to all, the rich and poor alike through the cross. He is the One that has risen from the dead to transform us and the whole world for the sake of the love of the one who made us. He is the one who welcomes us not to be tormented but to be freed to serve and love and give and live in peace with our neighbors and to see the world through God's own eyes. And there is no chasm He will not cross to be the bridge between us and the the least of His children.

Let us pray.

Holy God,

you reach out in love through Jesus Christ to save us so that we may live as faithful servants of you alone. Unchain us from our desire for wealth and power so that we may, in turn, release others from the prisons of poverty, hunger, and oppression. Amen.