The parable of the rich man and Lazarus is one of those provocative parables that ought to obliterate the popular notion that Jesus was a nice guy that went around telling clever stories to get human beings to be happy and get along with one another. Like the Parable of the 10 Virgins this parable concludes with half the characters in heaven and half in hell. As disturbing as the story is for us modern Western Christians, it would have been even more disturbing for the 1st century Jew. Our sympathies are with Lazarus from the start. Even if our actions indict us for not helping the poor, we at least have good intentions for the most part. This congregation especially has enough global awareness to understand that many people are poor despite their best intentions and hard work ethic. There are simply some political and social systems that lead to widespread poverty, and we have compassion for the victims for those systems. So we will go to Haiti, carry food and medicine to people in those villages, just to mention one example. We have sympathy for Lazarus.

The 1st century Jew probably would not have the same sympathy. There was a strong theological tradition in Judaism grounded in the idea that you reap what you sew. You get what you deserve. If you are poor and suffering, then some known or unknown sin is the cause. This is the position of Job’s so-called friends who said to him, “If you put away the sin that is in your hand and allow no evil to dwell in your tent, then…life will be brighter than noonday, and darkness will become like morning” (Job 11:14-17). In other words there were many Jews who held to this prosperity gospel approach to life. If you’re good God will bless you with wine, women, and wealth. If you’re evil God will curse you with poverty, disease, and friendlessness.

So we have a stark, unsettling parable flowing from the lips of Jesus. He is confronting powerful social and theological forces with a parable that undermines the easy platitudes of pious people. Lazarus the poor man becomes the hero of the story, and the rich man is the villain rightfully judged by an omniscient God. It would be unsettling for many 1st century Jews because they wouldn’t expect the poor man to be exalted. It’s probably unsettling for many modern Western Christians because we don’t want anyone to go to hell, regardless of their income. There Jesus goes again; upsetting everyone with his condemnation and, to coin a new word, his “condemnation” of a rich guy.
Sermon Body

Join me, if you dare, as we try to hear Jesus speak to our 21st century world through a parable from his first century world. It begins with two characters as starkly different as the five foolish virgins were from the five wise virgins, as told in last week’s parable. Jesus begins his parable “There was a rich man.” The man has no name. He’s just a rich man. But the words “rich man” translated into Latin is dives, so sometimes he is called Dives. Jesus doesn’t give him a name. He only tells us he “dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury everyday” (16:19). Purple was the color for royalty. Anything made of purple was Nordstroms expensive, because the color purple had to be meticulously extracted from oyster shells. Fine linen was underclothing that made silk garments seem like they came from Goodwill. The phrase indicated they were expensive Egyptian products sometimes called “woven air.” This is not to be confused with Air Jordans, a basketball shoe, worn by a rich guy who only wears Hanes undergarments. But you are in the right economic zone if you’re thinking of his majesty Air Jordan. Living in luxury each day implied, as the phrase is sometimes translated, that he “feasted sumptuously each day.” This guy had gourmet meals every day. It was Angus Barn without the barn. More like Angus Castle.

The other character in the parable is given a name, Lazarus. The name comes from the Hebrew name “Eleazer” which means “God helps.” There was an Eleazer in the Old Testament that was the servant of Abraham. Though he’s a fictional character in the parable, Jesus is offering some foreshadowing here that God will help him, and he will eventually end up with Father Abraham, resting at his bosom, and feasting at his table. But on earth Lazarus is a pitiful beggar. He is covered with sores and longing to eat any of the crumbs that might fall from the table of the rich man with no name. Jesus paints the picture further by telling us the dogs came by to lick his sores. That seems gross and it certainly isn’t a pleasant thought. Some scholars believe the dogs licking Lazarus wounds indicate how helpless he was. The dogs that hunted for scraps in the city landfill called gehenna, considered Lazarus little more than refuse. It’s pathetic. Other scholars say the dogs were the only ones who showed some compassion for Lazarus. They licked his wounds as a form of healing. The scholars cite ancient sources that dogs were sometimes used to lick wounds of victims because chemicals in the dog’s saliva had a healing effect. I don’t know which one is right. I only know that if I got to the point where dogs were licking my wounds every day while I was lying helplessly on the ground outside a rich man’s home, I would be one pathetic puppy.

Death

The time came when both Lazarus and the rich man died. Everyone expected Lazarus to die. Dogs are licking his wounds you know. They didn’t expect the rich man to die, at least not at the same time. Jesus tells us the angels took Lazarus to Abraham’s side. According to the Talmud, Abraham’s bosom is the eternal home of the righteous.
So Lazarus dies and God’s angels carry him to a place where the righteous will abide. The rich man dies and there is no funeral, no angels, and no blissful afterlife. He is simply buried. Next thing we know he is in hell where he is in torment. One of the most tormenting factors of his existence in hell is that he could see or sense or know, in some way, that he is not with Abraham. He can see that Lazarus is at Abraham’s bosom and he is not.

Now we can’t help, at least I can’t help but reflect on why Lazarus went to heaven (if you’ll allow me to use the word anachronistically) and why the rich man was in hell. Is this some leftwing, liberal socialist scenario where the poor automatically go to heaven and the rich go to hell? Is this the “Great Reversal” about which some people speak? God loves the poor and hates the rich. Is that why Lazarus went to heaven and the rich no name went to hell?

I don’t think so. As the parable moves forward we see the rich man first requests that Lazarus come and dip his finger in water and cool his tongue with it. When that wish isn’t granted – indeed, it’s impossible because of the great chasm between the two -- then the rich man asks for Lazarus to do another favor. He wants Lazarus to return to earth and warn his brothers about this newly realized reality. He wants Lazarus to carry this message so his 5 brothers will avoid his eternal plight. This too is denied. He argues furthers that if someone will return from the dead, his brothers will “repent.” That’s a key word. It reveals the rich man understands that he had been wrong. It’s too late for him to repent, but it may not be for his brothers. Repent, doesn’t mean “to be sorry.” It means “to change, to alter course, to do a complete turn around and go the other way.” The rich man was in hell, not because he was rich, but because he had ignored Moses and the prophets. He should’ve repented on earth and obeyed Moses and the Prophets, but he didn’t. The Law and the Prophets had commanded the Jews to care for the poor and take care of the weak. There are many examples of this but just a couple will demonstrate the case.

From the Law: Deut 15:11

“Therefore I command you to be open-handed toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land.”

From the Prophets: Isaiah 58:10

“If you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday.”

This unnamed rich man had walked by the pitiful Lazarus every day. He claimed to be a Jew, evidenced by his call to “Father Abraham” when his life was over and he was experiencing torment in hell. Yet, his Jewishness couldn’t save him. He may have been a cultural Jew but he wasn’t a practicing Jew, i.e. he wasn’t practicing the teachings of Moses and the Prophets. Just as there is such a thing as a cultural Christian, but not a
practicing Christian, his cultural identity wouldn’t save him from hell. He had been commanded by Moses and the Prophets to care for the poor, but he ignored the poor. He had basked in his luxury, self-absorbed by his fine wines, regal clothing, and gated lifestyle. He was condemned by a life that ignored the commands of the God he claimed to believe in.

Translation from Jewish Theology to Christian Theology

How does this translate into the Christian faith? We teach justification by faith don’t we? We teach we cannot earn salvation through works, even the good works of being generous to the poor. We can’t earn salvation by feeding Lazarus. All of that is true. But neither do we teach that faith and works are two separate matters. The sting of this parable is true for the New Testament just as it was for the Jewish mindset of Jesus’ contemporaries. James, the brother of Jesus said, “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if people claim to have faith but have no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about their physical needs what good is it? The same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead” (James 2:14-17). Just a few short epistles later John declares, “If anyone of you has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in you?” (1 Jn 3:17). The NT teaches that faith and works are part of the same fabric. Jesus is teaching a powerful truth in this parable that every age needs to hear: **We can’t separate our eternal destiny with our earthly activity!** We can’t ignore the poor, step over their bodies, dismiss their pleas, and remain absorbed in our materialistic pursuits and expect to end up anywhere but with this tormented rich man. Is that a harsh statement? Well, it’s no more harsh than this parable Jesus used to disturb the lovers of money in his day from their hell-directed journey. Jesus made eternal destiny and earthly activity the issue, not me.

Lazarus Today

I don’t know if there are more poor per capita in the world today than in Jesus’ day. I know he was absolutely right when he said the poor will always be with us. Just this week I read in the Durham Herald-Sun that the number of the world’s hungry is growing at an alarming rate. For the first time ever the number of people on earth who are chronically malnourished has soared above the 1 billion mark. Every day an estimated 25,000 people die from hunger, malnutrition and related diseases. That seems to be an overwhelming problem. In fact, today’s morning paper contained an article that predicted the poverty rate in the United States would be higher in 2009 than any year since 1960 when war on poverty was declared. The 15 percent poverty rate is disturbing and indicates more and more Lazarus’s are lying at our gates. There are way too many Lazarus’s in the world.
Can we save, feed, have compassion on the Lazarus’s of the world and the ones at our own doorsteps? Some say the answer lies in a radical restructuring of society and a move toward full-fledged socialist economies. Other equally concerned people argue for the opposite approach. They call for more pure capitalism. The answer lies in the free market enterprise system. I have my opinions about those approaches, but let me suggest to you a third way more focused on the call of Christ to his body on earth. A husband and wife time, founders of empty tomb, inc., in Champaign, Illinois have tracked American Christian expenditures as well as global needs. This couple, John and Sylvia Ronsvalle have estimated that $30-$50 billion a year could meet the most essential human needs around the world. “Projects for clean water and sanitation, prenatal and infant/maternal care, basic education, immunizations, and long-term development efforts are among the activities that could help overcome the poverty conditions that now kill and maim so many children and adults.”

The Ronsvalles go on to write: “If church members in the United States would increase their giving to 10 percent of their income, there would be more than $65 billion per year available for overseas ministries and $15 billion a year for meeting the needs of our neighbors across town, even while maintaining current congregational program.”

I just want to let that sink in for a moment ..........

Sometimes we think the Lazarus problem is overwhelming and there’s nothing we can do. But God is in the business of doing the impossible, and he has a strong history of using people to accomplish his mission. Years ago, a little known preacher in England preached a sermon on this parable. A man in the congregation by the name of Albert Schweitzer, came to church that day and his life was changed. Schweitzer was enormously gifted with degrees in music, medicine, and theology. He could do just about anything. Upon hearing the sermon of the rich man and Lazarus, Schweitzer was convicted by the Holy Spirit that he was the rich man and the people of Africa were Lazarus. He was led by the Holy Spirit to dedicate his life to the poorest people in central Africa. Soon he left the safety of England for the unknowns of the heart of Africa, and he gave his heart, soul, time and abilities to the poorest of the poor in central Africa. I still remember old pictures of old Albert Schweitzer, playing his little organ, off there in the middle of the jungles of Africa. That parable, the rich man and Lazarus, changed his life. God changed the life of Dr. Schweitzer by means of that powerful parable.

That was about 100 years ago. Albert Schweitzer didn’t hunger in Africa, but he ended the hunger of many. He inspired many others to leave their lives of comfort and take the risk of going outside their gates to help the poor Lazarus’s find a meal, receive some medical attention, and add Christ-like beauty to the world. More importantly, he followed the simple, yet provocative call of Jesus in this parable to pay attention to those who are at our doorsteps and hungry. He demonstrated his faith in Christ through his care for the poor.
Conclusion

Is there a Lazarus at your doorstep? Is there a Lazarus in your community? Is there some way for you to take seriously the call of Jesus to demonstrate our faith through deeds of compassion? Of course. Absolutely! You can personally act by bringing canned goods to the church. We regularly collect them to fill the YBA food closet, as well as other food organizations. It just takes a little effort. You can give to the budget of this church to feed others through Baptist Men, Baptist World Aid, the Durham Rescue Mission, and others. And you can keep the church’s feet to the fire, holding us accountable for how our budget reflects our fidelity to the teachings of Christ. Push us toward greater faithfulness. You can go to Haiti, India, and Belize to join people like George, Biju, and Leena who are finding and feeding the Lazarus’s in the world’s poorest districts. And of course, you can find the poor anywhere you go, if you will only pay attention. There is no excuse. Absolutely none. There was no excuse for this rich man who passed by Lazarus every day. And there is no excuse for you and me. If you’re waiting from someone to come back from the dead to shake you up, …consider yourself shaken. Jesus died, and came back from the dead. And he’s here today, telling us to have compassion on poor Lazarus. Amen.