

September 28, 2025
Lectionary 26 Year C
The 16th Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 16:19-31
Amos 6:1a, 4-7
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

At the Gate

I wonder what was going through the rich man's mind, whenever he had to walk past Lazarus to go somewhere, to go shopping, to go to a party, to go and do business in the town. I wonder what he thought about this poor man, Lazarus, covered with sores, whose only contact was the stray dogs who licked his wounds. I wonder how the rich man determined that he didn't have to help him, didn't have to do anything for him, didn't have any obligations to him.

It becomes obvious later in the story that Jesus told that the rich man knew Lazarus, that he had seen Lazarus. When the rich man was struggling in agony and torment after his death, he used Lazarus's name, asking Abraham to have Lazarus come and give him comfort in his torments. But the fact that he knew Lazarus's name did not mean that he had a relationship with him. It's more likely that at some point he had asked one of his servants, "Who is that disgusting beggar with the sores lying at my gate?" You can almost also hear him saying, "And how can I get rid of him?"

So, I wonder what was going through the rich man's mind, how he decided that Lazarus wasn't someone he needed to help.

He didn't get it from his faith. I'm certain that Jesus wanted us to assume that both of these men were Jewish, part of the same faith family. After all, in the afterlife that the men go to in the story, they both encounter Abraham. Lazarus sits in the presence of Abraham, the great ancestor of the Jewish people, and when the rich man calls out to Abraham, across the great chasm that separates him from Lazarus,

and from comfort and peace, he calls him Father Abraham, recognizing his own kinship with Abraham, and therefore with Lazarus; a kinship that he had refused to acknowledge when they were both alive, when Lazarus was in torment and the rich man lived in comfort and luxury.

Since the rich man was Jewish, it means that he would have been taught the scriptures, when he was a child. He would have learned the law and the prophets, and the law and the prophets are clear about the responsibility of those who have resources, money, land, status, position in the world toward those who do not have those things.

In the law codes in Leviticus we find these words,

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. 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: I am the Lord your God. (Leviticus 19:9-10)

In Deuteronomy these sentiments are declared to be part of the nature and character of God, that God's people are supposed to reflect in the world, to take a guide for their own behavior:

For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Deuteronomy 10:17-19)

In the prophet Jeremiah, part of the reason given for the Babylonian exile is that people have forsaken God, and one of the examples of this is described in these words:

They know no limits in deeds of wickedness;
they do not judge with justice
the cause of the orphan, to make it prosper,
and they do not defend the rights of the needy.
Shall I not punish them for these things?
says the Lord,
and shall I not bring retribution
on a nation such as this? (Jeremiah 5:28-29)

And in today's Old Testament reading, from the prophet Amos, we hear these words addressed to the rich:

Woe to those who are at ease in Zion
and for those who feel secure on Mount Samaria.
Woe to those who lie on beds of ivory
and lounge on their couches
and eat lambs from the flock
and calves from the stall,
who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp
and like David improvise on instruments of music,
who drink wine from bowls
and anoint themselves with the finest oils
but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!

Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile,
and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away. (Amos 6:1a, 4-7)

Those who live in the lap of luxury, who, like the rich man in today's parable, feast sumptuously, are condemned.

Now, I could go on and on with quotes from the Old Testament about this issue, the commandments to care for the poor and needy, the widow, the orphan, the stranger and the prophetic condemnations of those who do not follow those laws, the moral codes that God has put in place, so that God's people would reflect God's nature and character in the world, but since a sermon where I just basically read the Old Testament to you, might get a little long, and perhaps even a little tedious, just trust me that the quotes I have just read you are a representative sample of this theme from the Old Testament and not all that is said on the subject.

Back to today's parable. Clearly, the rich man would have known this, or at least some of it. Even if he was not one to listen to his rabbi when he was growing up or to pay particular attention in synagogue as an adult, still with the number of times the treatment of those who are poor comes up in the Old Testament, he would have had to be plugging his ears and humming through all of it not to have heard about God's thoughts on the subject.

So, I still wonder what must have been going through his head when he walked past Lazarus, returning home from his day's activities to his daily rich meals, ignoring Lazarus, not seeing his needs or if he did see them, not feeling any obligation to help him.

I suspect that if we tried, we could maybe come up with some ideas about what was going through his head. I mean Lazarus was hardly an appealing figure. He lay at the rich man's gate, day and night, destitute, dirty, starving, sick. Because of him, stray dogs came into the neighborhood to lick his wounds. He was a nuisance.

Maybe the rich man thought if he ignored him, he would go away, go and find somewhere else to lay around. Maybe the rich man thought that he was lazy. Maybe the rich man thought that if he just tried harder, he could find some way of supporting himself. Maybe the rich man thought that if he started to give him handouts it would stop him from trying to better himself. Maybe the rich man wanted to teach him a lesson, that just because he was cluttering up the entrance to the rich man's property, he wasn't going to get any help. Maybe the rich man wanted to make it clear that he wasn't going to be manipulated.

Did you know that as far as I know we're the only church in town that gives cash support to people who are in need, through our Matthew 25 fund. Over the years we've helped people with tons of stuff—food, gas money, utility bills, prescriptions, car insurance, car repairs, car payments, rent, transportation, school supplies, clothing, bedding, and too many other things for me to list or even remember over the ten years that I've been here.

I've always felt pretty good about that, because gift cards, which a lot of churches give, or food donations, which a lot of churches give, are nice, but don't help you if you're about to lose your apartment or you don't have gas in your car to get the grocery store or insurance for your car or money to pay your electric bill, then a gift card is good, but not the kind of help you necessarily need.

Other pastors are kind of shocked when I tell them that we give money. That we have a fund, the Matthew 25 fund, based on this scripture reading from Matthew 25:34-40:

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was

in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.’

At my old church in Connecticut, we used to give money too, through what we called our Love Fund, our version of the Matthew 25 fund, but we had limits on what we would give. I didn’t administer that fund, the other pastor did. I don’t know what he did for people in the congregation, but for people in the community he would give \$50.00 once a month. No more, no less. And while I’m sure that that helped them a little and I know that they were grateful for the help, I also know that it didn’t change their lives or their situations.

With our Matthew 25 fund, we can really solve some problems for people that can help them to catch up with their lives. Because sometimes that’s all people need, someone to help them buy some time so that they can get their financial ship righted again, like if they’ve missed work because they were sick or a loved one was sick, and they had to take care of them. Many people work in jobs that don’t have paid sick time. Or if they lose a job and need some help making it through while they wait for their paycheck at a new job. Or if their car breaks down and they don’t have anything in savings to pay for repairs.

I feel really good about our Matthew 25 fund and the substantive difference it helps us to make in people’s lives. But it’s also hard to see the needs out there, to hear the struggles of people who just can’t make ends meet, even when they’re really trying, to hear from people who just can’t seem to make it work, for all kinds of reasons, many of which are beyond their control.

And it's hard when I have to say, no, that I can't help, because the money's not there or when the money isn't enough really to meet the need, when it's a symbolic amount, that will buy a couple of bags of groceries or pay for a tank of gas, but won't fix the car or pay the rent or keep the lights on for one more month.

And it's hard not to worry about keeping some money aside for the next person, the next need, but if I do that, hoarding the money in the Matthew 25 fund until someone more needy comes along, then what's the point of it at all?

It's tricky and I'll be honest, there are times when I wish I didn't have to deal with it, didn't have to hear the sad stories, see the despair or the panic in people's eyes, know that their needs are greater than our ability to help. Sometimes I wish I could ignore Lazarus at the gate.

And maybe, to give the rich man in today's parable a whole pile of credit, that he probably doesn't deserve, maybe that's why he ignores Lazarus. Because he's overwhelmed by his needs, because he's afraid that the help he could give him wouldn't be enough to really solve Lazarus's problems, because having a relationship with someone who is in the kind of distress Lazarus is in can be challenging, draining.

Somehow, I doubt it, because that's not really the way that Jesus tells this parable, he doesn't present the rich man as a man who struggles with moral dilemmas.

But if we are people who struggle with moral dilemmas when it comes to what we can give and how we can help those who are suffering or struggling around us, if I am a person who frequently has to make judgment calls about how to help those in need around us, well, then we actually have some help with those moral dilemmas, those judgment calls, when Lazarus shows up at our gates.

We have the law and the prophets. And we have Jesus Christ, who has come back from the dead to teach us what it means to have life and have it abundantly. And having life abundantly doesn't mean clinging to the things of this world,

clinging to comfort and to riches as though they can save us. We have Jesus, who told us that the poor are blessed in the kingdom of God. We have Jesus who told us to love one another. We have Jesus who is our greatest treasure. Above everything else, we have Jesus. Thanks be to God. Amen.