

GOOD SHEPHERD LUTHERAN CHURCH

Sunday Sermon, September 26, 2004

Pentecost 11/Proper 21c

Reading: Luke 16:19-31

¹⁹ “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰ And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹ who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. ²² The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³ In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴ 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.’ ²⁵ 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. ²⁶ 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.’ ²⁷ He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house - ²⁸ for I have five brothers - that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ ²⁹ Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ ³⁰ He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ ³¹ 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.’ ”

“Value Placement”

In a television interview, former President Jimmy Carter talked about his involvement with Habitat for Humanity. President Carter said he had long been a member of a congregation made up of people who sincerely cared about helping the poor. Among many projects, each year the congregation collected money to provide a special Thanksgiving dinner for a poor family in Plains, Georgia. In addition, each year the congregation would ask a local social service agency to provide the names of families who needed assistance with at Christmas. However, President Carter began to ask an important question. Why did the congregation need help from a social service agency in finding individuals and families who needed support? It was because no member of the congregation knew any poor person or poor family personally by name. The irony of the situation struck a cord of concern in the heart of President Carter.

Certainly Habitat for Humanity gives people the opportunity not only to help someone who doesn't own a home, but also the opportunity to get to know that family personally while the home and is being built. As you know, with the Habitat for Humanity the eventual homeowner works right along with a team of workers in constructing the new home. As we live out our congregational vision, I would love to see members of Good Shepherd join others in supporting the ministry of Habitat for Humanity in the Dayton area.

The point that stuck a cord in the heart of President Carter is an important point. His home congregation is much like ours in the fact that we support families at Thanksgiving and at Christmas. We also care about the poor. However, the all-important question is this: Do you know people who are economically poor personally by name? Some of us do but many of do not.

Father Robert Capon tells the gospel story for today this way: “So we have a man in hell, on the wrong side of a gulf that he cannot cross. gulf he created a gulf he enjoyed, where he was secluded in his gated

community without having to be bothered by the likes of Lazarus. A person he likely saw so many times that he became easy to ignore.” One of the real dangers of wealth is that it allows us to live an isolated life. The man in the parable was so isolated that a big ditch was built - a ditch between the haves and the have-nots, so big that no one could cross it.

Luke gives this man no name. Tradition has called him “Dives” which means “rich man”. However, as Luke tells the story, he has no name. A person’s name is good only in a relationship with someone else. This man lived as though he needed not relationships with anyone, especially with a poor person who sat at the gate of his property. He passed Lazarus every day but failed to stop to learn his name. His life was isolated before he died and it was not much different after he died.

What is the value we place on hearing this parable speak to us? Can we put our name in the place of that man who has no name? Can you realize that you are the rich person who needs to connect with those around you who have names, so that you can help those in need?

What this man did not realize is that he was living not only distant from others but also distant from God who calls us to be in relationship with each other - especially with people who are different than we are. In these relationships, God not only teaches us many things but also gives us the opportunity to share God’s love and care especially for people who are far less better off than we are economically. This is part of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. As we again hear this story, the rich man took pride in the fact that he could call Abraham “Father.” With Abraham as Father, he had no need to acknowledge the poor man who sat at his gate. He realized his desperate situation only after his death and so he wants to save his brothers.

Abraham knows there is little hope for his five brothers, because their “filters” are so strong that they too cannot comprehend the needs of people right around them. It is true. We all have “filters” that make it difficult to see those around us who are in need - especially people who are different from us. We do not know these people by name because

we have not taken the time to learn who these folks are. The truth is that there are “filters” in our thinking and in our living which are so strong that it is very difficult to live out our calling in reaching out to the poor - which comes through loud and clear in this parable. Our culture, our wealth, even our gender gets in the way of responding to what Jesus is saying in this parable.

So what are we to do? It comes down to intentionally reaching out caring for someone different from ourselves. It means taking time to know the name of someone who we would normally ignore if it were not for the words of Jesus. It means treating and thinking about people with respect and dignity especially when we have a hard time understanding why someone does what they do or appears to be just trying to work the system. It means taking time to get down on an eye to level and listen to a child when it is would be easier not to bother. It looks like giving attention and honest recognition to people like Lazarus in the parable - people ignored in our community. It requires something personally for each of us - that is for sure.

What would it look like in our communities if we were very serious about making sure all our filters did not keep us from reaching out to others - especially those who might be poor and in need? It might mean taking time to find out the names of children who live on your street - making sure, you connect with the stories of your neighbors. It might mean making sure; you bring food every first Sunday of the month to support our neighborhood food bank or some other food bank in your neighborhood. It might mean volunteering at a helping agency in our community - getting to know people personally - listening to their stories and their concerns. It might mean serving on a small tasks force that I am currently putting together to develop a Community Resource Packet for people who come by the church office in need of food-gas or rent. As I mentioned to you, the drop-in opportunities have increased. The Church Council has approved putting together a Community Resource Packet and establishing some guild lines for dispersing food and gas vouchers. If you would like to work with some of us on this task force, please let me know. It might be as simple as looking around during the

sharing of the Peace and intentionally reaching out your hand to someone you do not know very well.

This parable moves me to make sure that we lift up once again the ministries of the ELCA World Hunger Appeal, Bread for the World, Lutheran World Relief, and the work of our Church in supporting people who suffer with the epidemic of Aids. One of the saddest things is to come to the end of your life and discover that you did very little to help someone else in need - especially someone who is different from you. The man in the parable discovered the loss when it was too late. He had all the things that spelled success but he was a failure in the things that really matter. It is the little things done for someone else that can change people and change you as well.

As I close in prayer, please bow your head and listen to these words as we pray. Let us pray: Gracious God: Take our lives and speak through them. Take our minds and think through them. Take our hearts and set them on fire for others. Amen

If we dare to live out this simple prayer, our lives will change as we reach out to those around us. Lead us to find new ways to share our faith. Lead us to learn the names and hear the stories of those around us, especially those who are different from us. Help us stop and see those who were once invisible to us because we did not take time to stop and see them. May we have courage pray this prayer but also live this pray. May we place our values and our faith where it counts? Amen.

Pastor Thomas D. Prochaska
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
901 E. Stroop Road
Kettering, Ohio 45459-4688