

“What Does It Take?”  
Luke 16:19-31 CEB

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Last week we heard the parable of the middle manager who turned his loyalties from those at the top of systems of power to those who were most impacted by those systems. In this week’s parable the middle manager has seemingly disappeared and we’re introduced to two new characters: a rich man, and Lazarus.

The rich man is really, really rich. Filthy rich. Only wears purple and fine linen, has his gourmet chef prepare him the finest organic hummus and artisan stuffed grape leaves. He is the 1%’er of his time. Insert the name or face of any multi-billionaire that you love to loathe and that’s who Jesus is talking about.

Lazarus is a poor man who is so poor that his hunger was never satisfied because he only received the crumbs from the rich man’s table. He had open wounds that instead of receiving salves or medicine for, dogs would lick. These two men represent the opposite ends of the same spectrum of wealth and poverty, fortune and misfortune.

When they die, Lazarus is carried away in the shelter of angels and is placed by the side of Abraham, his spiritual ancestor, a place of pride, protection, and honor. The rich man goes to, well, as we said as kids: h-e-double-hockey-sticks.

Even there the rich man only sees Lazarus as a tool to be used - he begs for Lazarus to help him relieve his pain from the fire that now burns him. When his request is rejected by Abraham, the rich man begs for Lazarus to be sent to warn his brothers - equally rich, entitled, and surely headed to hell - to change their ways and save them from his fate. This request is also

rejected. There is no convincing them what they have already been warned about. Their fate is sealed.

Like any parable, there are a lot of messages you can take away from this story. You can heed the warning the rich man and his brothers ignored and reject the trappings of wealth, transform your life by giving away all you own, and save yourself from the eternal fires. You can scoff at or look down on the rich man if you don't find yourself in a similar position, being assured that for all the suffering and oppression we endure in this lifetime, there will be comfort and peace in the eternal life to come. You might hear this story and dwell on the images of heaven and hell and the implications it has on your beliefs or unbeliefs - fretting about whether or not your own actions or lifestyle will measure up when your time comes.

Having heard no reports back from the afterlife, I am not sure we're meant to take those images literally, but rather, we should look to the rich man and Lazarus as symbols meant to point us toward right relationship here on earth, in this time and place. When we listen to this parable as if we were in the crowd that Jesus taught, we might hear not just a message for those of us who are as rich as the rich man or for those of us who are as poor as Lazarus, but for every one of us.

I think it is important for us to notice that in a story with only three characters - Abraham, Lazarus, and the rich man - only two of them have a name. Abraham is their forefather, a prophet and leader, the messenger speaking hard truths on behalf of God. Lazarus is ignored and unknown by his peers in his lifetime but is known and called by name by God. He is loved. He is cared for. His struggle is seen and acknowledged.

The rich man has no name. He is less of an individual person and more of a symbol representing greed and selfishness. I wonder if he is not the symbol of a particular person but

rather of a culture that privileges wealth and ignores poverty. I wonder if the rich man might draw our attention to systems of healthcare that only provide care to those who can afford it, to food systems that are based on profit and access for a few rather than ensuring everyone who hungers has enough to eat, systems that at every turn benefit a select some and harm many.

Jesus holds up this anonymous rich man and not only interrogates the assumptions that are made about his worth and merit, but points us back to those who like Lazarus are ignored and mistreated under our culture and systems that are built to disenfranchise, that are secure and functional for only a few, that keep us separate from one another, always looking to the rich either for care or as an aspiration, turning away from Lazarus except when we need him to work for us, to heal our wounds, to comfort us.

Here's the catch: I already know the rich man or the systems of wealth that he represents are no good. I'm already on board with tossing them out or reforming them. I believe in my core that the distance between rich and poor is too great and that we all suffer as a result of that. I spend a great deal of time criticizing these systems, agonizing over them, and plotting a revolution of love and justice that will make them obsolete. And if like me, you find yourself dedicating all your energy to shaking your head at the antics of the rich or dreaming up ways to work for equity, this is also a story for you. Because, in addition to looking critically at the wealth and power of the rich man, we need to look to Lazarus.

What this means to me is that if I am advocating for change but do not know the real people I am advocating for, I am still missing part of the point. If I spend all of my time complaining about the rich and no time caring for the poor, I am no better than the rich man, concerned about him and his fate, and ignoring Lazarus.

This parable is a call to meet Lazarus, to learn his name, to hear his struggle, to ensure that his wounds are healed and his hunger is satiated. It is a call to draw attention to the rich and elite and the privileged and the powerful because of the impact they have on the Lazarus' of the world. And to do that, we must listen to the stories and lived experiences of those who are too often ignored. The best advocacy comes when we have heard personal stories or witnessed something unjust that moves us to provoke change. The best advocacy is grounded in relationship, not just in shaking our fist at those who rule above us.

This is why at Edgewood we advocate for political policies that welcome refugees into our nation, **and** why we hold coat drives for the new refugees already in our local community. Because folks are in relationship with local refugees, we know their stories, from the barriers to settling in this country to the practical experience of living through a Michigan winter for the first time in their life. Relationships with refugees inform our political advocacy **and** call on us to care for our neighbors right now. To poke and prod our government to do better **and** to look into our own communities and hold each other accountable while we're waiting for systems to change.

I was recently at an East Lansing city council meeting, along with a contingent of Edgewood folks and others in the community who are concerned about the over-policing of people of color in this city. I watched as one Edgewood member stood up to speak to Council with a call for justice. And then, after the meeting, I watched that same person talking with the family members of a young Black man whose future has been stolen because of the same over-policing we were advocating against. She wasn't talking policy or wasting energy chastising Council - she was checking on their son, listening to their concerns, offering her own lived experience by connecting them with resources and helping them navigate an impossible process.

The strength of her voice that we had just heard in the Council meeting found its strength because of the relationships she nurtured and the ways she got to know those most impacted by the policies she spoke out against.

When I hear this parable, I am left wondering: Are we spending most of our time tearing down the rich man or are we caring for Lazarus? Are we aware of where harm comes from and working to change that, *and* are we working for the wellness and healing of those who are harmed? Is our hope for the future grounded in the lived experience of people in the present? Do we know Lazarus's name? Do we know his story? Are we waiting for an angel to send us a message or do we recognize the prophetic voices of those in our midst?

This parable always hits different for me in the weeks leading up to an election. This is a season when a lot of folks will spend their energy criticizing their opponents or pointing fingers, especially to those in power or grasping for power. However you vote - republican or democrat or independent - it's easy to vote based on who you are against or who you are afraid of being in power. It is more powerful to vote when you take a stand for what and who you believe in. When our politics are grounded in the stories and lived experiences of real people. When we understand that our choices will impact our neighbors, our friends, ourselves. What would it mean to cast a vote for Lazarus instead of against the rich man? How does that impact what we do after we submit our ballot - where our convictions might lead us, how our actions may ground us.

When Jesus teaches us about the rich man and Lazarus, he points out the fallacy of living for greed or exploiting others, but he also points us toward Lazarus. So when we are rightfully critical of the filthy rich or the systems that oppress and keep us separate, while we are advocating for justice, let us also look for Lazarus. Let's hear his story. Let's feed the hungry. Let's heal each other. May it be so.