

LAZARUS AT THE GATE



Luke 16:19 "Jesus said, 'There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; (and) even the dogs would come and lick his sores.'"

As many of you know, I spent the last 15 years of my full-time ministry as the Rector of St. John's Episcopal Church in Bridgeport, a massive neo-Gothic structure, seating 1,00 people, designed by the same architect, James Renwick, who designed St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City, and featuring a 30-foot

stone reredos behind the High Altar carved by Gutzon Borglum, best known for his work of Mount Rushmore. At the turn of the last century, the city of Bridgeport was at its height, but like so many other cities in this country, Bridgeport soon suffered from the spread of suburbs after the war, taking away the white, privileged families, and leaving behind the poor and working classes. When I served there, St. John's had four services every Sunday: in English, Spanish, French, and Creole, such was the diversity of the neighborhood!

During my tenure, I was always the first one there on Sunday mornings, arriving at least an hour before the first Service --- so I was the one who unlocked the doors, adjusted the thermostats, turned on the lights, and made the coffee. As the first one there on Sundays, I was also the one who occasionally ran into Lazarus at our gate. At this church, we did not need to take Jesus' parable of Lazarus at the gate as a metaphor. We could and did take it quite literally as we often found someone sleeping on the doorsteps of the main entrance, or living behind the bushes between the majestically carved front doors of the church, or camping in the tall scrubs along Park Avenue, or just resting on the bench in the St. Francis Garden. When parishioners saw them, they often became very agitated and came to me demanding that we 'do something,' meaning either that we chase them away and tell them not to come back again, or we

help them find proper shelter and get the assistance they need. And it was not only the homeless sleeping at our door that we found, but also prostitutes who frequented the dark corners of our back parking lot at night, or drug addicts making deals just off our busy sidewalks. And so on occasion I wonder, at the end times, which side of the great chasm will we all be on? Will Father Abraham remind us that during our lifetime we received our good things, and these poor people in like manner evil things, such that they will be comforted in Abraham's bosom, and we will be tormented in agony?

Interestingly, the poor man in Jesus' parable is named Lazarus, a sloppy Aramaic pronunciation of the Greek and Hebrew name, *Eleazar*. He is in fact remarkably the only character in any of Jesus' many parables and stories that is given a name, and this has left many wondering why. Because "Lazarus" is Aramaic, the name is thought to be authentic, as the Galileans were notorious for their regional accent. You may remember that time when Peter was identified in the courtyard by the servant of the high priest because of his accent, "Certainly you are also one of (Jesus' disciples)," she said, "for your accent betrays you" (Mt. 26.73), to which Peter denied knowing Jesus for the third time, and immediately the cock crowed. So, the name is quite authentic to that time and place and since the naming of the character is unique, it may suggest that perhaps

Jesus was adapting a well-known tale about a poor man named Lazarus, or perhaps Jesus named the poor man Lazarus with deliberate irony in reference to the meaning of his name, which translates from Hebrew "God is my help," or perhaps even in reference to his friend Lazarus of Bethany, whom he later raised from the dead.

The parable of Lazarus and the rich man is also unique because unlike Jesus' other stories, we do not readily identify with any of the characters there. Both Lazarus and the rich man are so exaggerated in their description that we do not easily relate to either of them. Lazarus is covered with unattended sores, and lies there in the street so weak and helpless, that he cannot even ward off the street dogs that come and lick his wounds. He is the most pathetic depiction of a poor beggar, in a kind of poverty more familiar in the streets of Calcutta than in our own avenues and boulevards, especially here in America. And Lazarus lies there desiring only to be fed from what fell from the rich man's table. Now in those days there were no knives, or forks, or napkins. Food was eaten with the hands, and, in very wealthy houses, hands were often cleansed by wiping them on hunks of bread, which were then thrown away. That was what Lazarus was probably waiting for, the discarded scraps of bread that were thrown from the rich man's table.

The rich man, who is later called Dives in the Western Church from the Latin word translated as "rich man" there in the Vulgate, is described in the parable as clothed in purple and fine linen, the clothes of kings and high priests. And the rich man it is said feasted sumptuously every day. The Greek word translated as 'feasting' is the word that was used not just for eating well, but for dining on the most exotic and costly dishes. In a country where the common people were fortunate if they ate meat once in the week, Dives is a figure of indolent self-indulgence. And perhaps because of that he is a person considered worthy of condemnation, and being burned and tormented in Hades.

Because otherwise what was his sin? There is no indication that Dives was a cruel or hurtful person, just rich. He had not, for instance, ordered Lazarus to be removed from his gate, as one might have expected from an evil man, as parishioners sometimes suggested regarding the poor at our door in Bridgeport. It would seem that Dives let the pathetic man lie in his doorway uninterrupted, except by the passing dogs. Moreover, Dives apparently made no objection to Lazarus receiving the bread which was flung from his table. One imagines that the rich man was well aware that some of his servants were taking the scraps out to the poor man, and he apparently did nothing to stop them. He did not seem to bother poor Lazarus in passing as

he left the house, or to curse him for his presence there. Dives apparently just stepped over him and went on his merry way. He was not deliberately unkind or ugly or cruel to the poor man. He just let him be. So, what exactly was Dives' sin?

The sin of Dives was probably that he never really responded to Lazarus lying there. Dives just accepted the poor man as part of the landscape and went on with his own life, without attempting to do anything for him at all. He seems undisturbed by his presence, and might have thought it perfectly natural and perhaps inevitable that Lazarus or someone like him should lie in pain and hunger at his door, while he wallowed in his luxury. Dives passed by his fellow man, hungry and in pain, and did nothing about it. He just stepped over him and went on his way. His was the punishment of the person who never notices, a person who never takes care, never gives thought to the distress of those around him, a person too busy with their own lives to be concerned about others. It is a terrible warning to us that the sin of Dives was not that he did bad things, but that he simply did nothing. It is not the sin of commission, but the sin of omission that condemns him here. The Jewish theologian, Elie Wiesel, a Holocaust survivor, wrote that the opposite of love is not hate, but is indifference. Dives was simply indifferent to Lazarus at his gate.

And how much are we like Dives then? How often do we ignore the indigent in our cities or the beggars in the doorways or the prostitute on the sidewalk? Do we pass the poor and destitute without even noticing them? Or noticing them, do we cross the street in order to avoid them? Do we shun completely the sordid and depressing parts of our cities, as though they didn't even exist? And for many of us they don't, because so many of us have moved to pleasant suburbs and fair villages. Do we like them neglect the plight of the homeless in our communities, or those who go hungry here, or the unemployed or the unemployable who sit at the doors of our churches and eat from the crumbs of our tables? How many of us care enough to do something, to get involved in some way, to march in protest, to rally legislation, to serve at Community Suppers or volunteer at local Food Banks, or with local Food Drives, as we here have struggled to find just 8 people from this congregation to 'man' our upcoming Food Drive. Similarly, many of our local non-profits are constantly struggling for financial support for their programs, here in the wealthiest parts of our country. Perhaps we are just like Dives' servants taking out our leftovers, giving away our pocket change, and old clothes to the poor man at the door and then doing nothing more? My friends, we may not wear purple and fine linen, and we may not feast sumptuously every day, but I fear we are more like Dives than we might like to think. We are richer

than we might want to admit, and less generous than we pretend to be. So how munificent are we really in a world that tells us again and again that we have to look after ourselves, to take care of #1, and to buy more and more stuff, and to acquire wealth and possessions and live sumptuously. Where are the voices in our community that say enough is enough, where are the people who notice the poor at our gates and do something, who lend an ear to their stories, a shoulder for them to cry upon, and a hand to help them up from the gutter? Why are we so few?

“As for those who in this present age are rich,” writes the author of the First Epistle to Timothy, “command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.” (1 Tim. 6.17-9). O Lord in thy mercy, help us to choose life. AMEN