



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Bridges of Compassion

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, September 25, 2022

The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Amos 6:1a, 4-7; 1 Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31

In the name of the one holy and living God. Amen.

There are some weeks in our liturgical year when the overall theme of our lectionary texts is hard to discern—some Sundays where it's hard to figure out exactly what the connection is between the Old Testament Lesson, the New Testament Lesson, and the Gospel. This is not one of those Sundays.

All three of our readings this morning have something to say about the dangers of wealth, the lure of riches, and the perils of loving money more than God. If you think the words of the prophet Amos—with those beds of ivory, idle songs of the harp, and bowls full of wine—are a bit too far-removed to be taken seriously; if the tone of the First Letter to Timothy seems a bit too lofty and philosophical to be taken to heart; there's absolutely no way you can miss the message of the Gospel, where Jesus' memorable and somewhat terrifying story of the rich man and Lazarus drives the point home. Maybe that's why he told it. Because he knew he'd get people's attention with a story about a rich man who has died and gone to hell.

The rich man in this story isn't just rich. He's very, very rich. Today, he would be one of the top "point one percent." And he's leading an over-the-top, hedonistic life. He dresses in purple, the super-expensive color that was reserved for the emperor and his family. His clothes are made of the finest linen, the same cloth that was worn by the priests who serve in God's sanctuary. This man doesn't save his fancy clothes for the Sabbath; he wears them all the time. And he feasts sumptuously every day, when feasting was normally reserved for major festivals. He isn't celebrating sacred time. He's simply indulging himself, and as Amy-Jill Levine has observed, engaging in something that is very familiar to us today: conspicuous consumption.¹

Jesus sets the rich man up against a poor man named Lazarus. Lazarus is among the poorest of the poor. He is starving and covered with sores, tended to only by the dogs who lick his wounds. Someone has laid him at the gate of the rich man on the assumption that the rich man will offer him aid—which, as everyone knows, God has commanded. But as Lazarus lies there, hungering for just a few crumbs from the rich man's table, the rich man refuses to give him even that.

When the rich man dies, he finds himself in Hades burning up in flames. He looks up, and very far away he sees Lazarus resting safely in the bosom of Abraham. The rich man brazenly asks Abraham to send Lazarus down to offer him a drop of water to cool his thirst. But it's too late. The social chasm that separated the rich man and Lazarus on earth has become, in the afterlife, a spiritual chasm that has been fixed and cannot be crossed. And the little bit of help that the rich man asks for, the little bit of help he refused to offer Lazarus when he was alive, cannot be given to him now.

It is a harsh and horrifying image of the afterlife, designed to shock Jesus' listeners out of their complacency. We, too, may be shocked. Because we, too, may have had the experience of meeting our

own Lazarus on the street and passing them by. I know I have. It's almost impossible to live in this city without encountering Lazarus on a daily basis. And whether we are wealthy or not so wealthy, we may feel a pang of recognition in hearing this tale, seeing a piece of ourselves in the rich man's character. So lest we judge that rich man too harshly, let's remember that we, too, have the capacity to distance ourselves, to insulate ourselves, from the suffering of others.

Bryan Stevenson is the founder and Executive Director of the Equal Justice Initiative, a human rights organization in Montgomery, Alabama. Stevenson has spent his life working in the criminal justice system defending the poor, the marginalized, the neglected, and the wrongly condemned. Through his work, he has come to believe that one of the ways we can create change in the world and achieve justice is to stay proximate to the people you are trying to help.

Stevenson says, "We think we can change the world by staying ... in places of power and privilege. ... [but] If we care about injustice, if we care about inequality, if we care about poverty, ... we're going to have to get close enough to those who are poor and excluded and neglected to understand the nature of that problem."²

The problem with the rich man wasn't his wealth *per se*; it was that his wealth became the sole focus of his life. It led him away from God and God's commandments. It allowed him to distance himself from another person's suffering and to deepen the social chasm that separated him from Lazarus.

Despite the fact that Lazarus was lying at his gate, despite the fact that he even seemed to know Lazarus by name, he did not offer to help him. He did not get proximate. What would have happened if, instead of passing him by every day, the rich man had stopped to give Lazarus some bread? What might he have learned about him? What story might Lazarus have told about how he got to this place? How might the rich man's heart have been broken open by what Lazarus said?

Stevenson writes: "You can't effectively fight abusive power, poverty, inequality, illness, oppression, or injustice and not be broken by it. ... Being broken is what makes us human. We all have our reasons. Sometimes we're fractured by the choices we make; sometimes we're shattered by things we would never have chosen. But our brokenness is also the source of our common humanity, the basis for our shared search for comfort, meaning, and healing. Our shared vulnerability and imperfection nurtures and sustains our capacity for compassion."³

Acknowledging our brokenness—and the brokenness of others—breaks our hearts open. And on that common ground, we can span vast chasms with bridges of compassion.

The story of the rich man and Lazarus isn't just about the rich and the poor. It's about proximity. If the rich man had taken the time to offer Lazarus help, if he had taken the time to hear his story, his fate in the afterlife would have been very different. With Lazarus lying at his gate, day in and day out, he had every opportunity to span that great chasm and build a bridge of compassion.

We have an opportunity here at St. Bart's to get proximate to our marginalized neighbors through the work being done at Crossroads Community Services. Many of you have volunteered there, many of you have faithfully served there, offering food to the hungry. Crossroads is housed in this very building right next door, about as proximate as you can get. How might we continue to build and expand the bridges of compassion with our neighbors there? How might our hearts be broken open by it?

Some things haven't changed much since the time of Jesus. The lure of wealth and the pursuit of riches are as powerful as ever in our culture, and it requires diligence and perseverance to guard against become captive to the love of money. The writer of First Timothy urges us to keep in good spiritual shape. "Fight

the good fight of the faith,” he writes, which is more accurately translated “contest the good contest.” Keeping true to our faith, keeping our hearts open, requires the energy and discipline of a trained athlete.

So, instead of leaving here today wondering—and perhaps worrying—about how the story of a rich man going to hell may reflect on us, let’s do something more productive. Let us turn our attention instead to the five brothers the rich man left behind, the ones he desperately wanted to warn so that they won’t end up like him. We would do better to focus on the characters in the story who remain among the living, who still have time to learn, to grow, and to change, and who have, as we do, the words of Moses and the prophets, and Jesus himself, to guide us.

Amen.

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(1) Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*, New York: Harper Collins, 2014, p. 252.

(2) Bryan Stevenson, "4 Rules for Achieving Peace and Justice" Harvard Kennedy School, Jan. 31, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9vI7UPuCUrE>.

(3) Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy*. New York: Random House, 2015, p. 289.