

**Year C: Proper 21a Jer 32:1-3a, 6-15; Ps 91:1-6, 14-16; 1Tim 6:6-19; Lk 16:19-51
St. Barnabas, Florissant – September 29, 2019**

Focus Sentence: How do we interact with Lazarus?

I offer these thoughts in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

While preparing this sermon, it seemed to me, the Lectionary readings for this morning made the front pages of our newspapers, and were featured on the evening news and on the Internet.

In case you're wondering what I'm talking about, you may have missed the news stories about the heated discussions concerning the homeless crisis in California, among other places.

California cities are apparently being deluged with homeless persons on their streets.

Of course, you might remember equally heated discussions a few years ago, here in St. Louis, concerning Larry Rice's New Life Evangelistic Center and its relationship with the homeless persons in our midst.

A number of downtown residents were adamantly opposed to the Center, and wanted the city to revoke its license, and close it permanently.

PAUSE

I guess that all these discussions could be boiled down to a single critical question: How do we interact with *Lazarus*?

In this morning's lesson from Luke's Gospel, Jesus paints a rather stark picture of Lazarus, the homeless man who has decided to "live" at the rich man's gate. This rich man is depicted as having a great life, being dressed in purple and fine linen, and feasting sumptuously every day. The homeless Lazarus, who is also described as being covered with sores, simply longs to ease his hunger by eating the scraps which fall from the rich man's table. Apparently, even these scraps are denied to him.

PAUSE

Jesus goes on to describe the later punishment of the rich man in Hades, and the comfort that Lazarus receives in the afterlife in the bosom of Abraham. When the rich man asks that Lazarus be sent to him in Hades to ease his torment with a drop of water, Abraham reminds him, “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. Besides all this, there is a great impassible chasm fixed between us.”

I guess it’s pretty obvious that here we encounter the scary part. The rich man is being punished with torment in Hades for *ignoring* Lazarus, and each one of us might have to question ourselves and ask if we’ve been guilty of the same behavior. Indeed, how *have* we been interacting with Lazarus?

And then, if that’s not enough, we have Paul’s admonition to Timothy this morning as well: “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.”

PAUSE

Before we make any snap judgments here, either of ourselves, or of California politicians, or even of the rich man in this morning’s Gospel, let’s admit that this question of “How do we interact with Lazarus?” is not a simple question.

By the way, one of the important lessons we clergy learn in preaching class is that you don’t leave your congregation with a *question* at the end of your sermon, but I think I’m going to have to violate that rule big-time this morning. Because I (we) have got a whole bunch of questions to wrestle with, and very few good answers.

PAUSE

First question, how do we know that Lazarus is truly in need?

Oh sure, in Jesus’ story, it’s pretty obvious that Lazarus is down and out. We don’t know how or why he got to this sad state, but Jesus describes him as poor and covered with sores. Yeah, we can agree that Lazarus is definitely in need.

But, you know, what about the people we encounter in our daily lives? Whether it's the guy standing at the exit ramp from the Interstate, holding a sign telling us that he's a homeless vet who can't get a job, or the couple down by Busch Stadium who have their own sign, accompanied with a very pained look, how do we know they're truly in need? What if they're just some kind of frauds? Some kind of cheats who are just trying to prey on our sympathy? And there are definitely cheats; on various school trips to Italy, when I was a Latin teacher, the group was warned about the people who pretend to be crippled beggars, but who then miraculously straighten up and walk away with the Euros you just gave them. And I've actually seen this happening!

PAUSE

Or how about another question: Aren't there agencies around here whose function it is to help Lazarus out? Whether they're tax-supported government agencies, or private charities, don't they have the resources to help Lazarus, and also the staff members to sort out whether Lazarus is truly in need? And, if I'm supporting these agencies, either through my taxes, or through my charitable contributions, isn't that enough?

OK, but then what does it mean to live in Missouri, a state that has declined to expand the Medicaid that could help Lazarus? Should we be doing more to urge that our state representatives reverse this stand on Medicaid?

It's also interesting to reflect on a conversation one of my clergy colleagues had with one of those state representatives, a self-described Christian by the way. You should know that the state senator in question admitted that he, as a Christian, did have some obligation to assist the poor, but that we as a society do not!! Curious to know where in the Gospel it says that.

PAUSE

Then another question: What do we as a parish, or I as a clergyperson, do when we have limited resources to help those in need, and the requests for help exceed those resources? Should we try to sort out the truly needy, the “worthy poor” as some have described them, from the deadbeats, or should we hand out assistance on a first-come/first-served basis? And, when the resources are exhausted, that’s that??

(I told you that I had a whole bunch of tough questions for us to wrestle with.)

PAUSE

Unfortunately, sisters and brothers, I don’t have a lot of answers to go along with all these questions.

I do believe that one problem the rich man in Jesus’ story had was that Lazarus had become *invisible* to him. How was he able to come and go every day, and not give some notice to Lazarus at his gate? He didn’t even wrestle with these questions; he simply chose to ignore them completely. We’ve heard stories of people stepping over the homeless on the street, and hurrying away; I hope that we don’t do this. Because, when we do this, that homeless person is essentially *invisible* to us. Does the sight of that homeless person at least cause us to ask these questions again in our minds? Does the sight of Lazarus at least make us wonder what we might do in *some* way to help him?

We can go back to Paul’s letter to Timothy. Paul writes, “As for those who in the present age are rich, 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.”

Of course, that raises yet other questions: How do we “do good?” How should we be “rich in good works, generous, and ready to share?” In practical terms, how *can* we most effectively do these things?

I’m sorry, sisters and brothers, but you’ll just have to try and answer these questions for yourselves. That might not be good sermonizing on my part, but keep on wrestling!

AMEN