

Amos 6:1a, 4-7 ~ Luke 16:19-31
Nothing Nattier in Nazareth
 September 29, 2019 ~ 16th Sunday after Pentecost
 The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Introduction to Scripture:

The parable you are about to hear was the answer that Albert Schweitzer gave when asked why he became a doctor as a second career, and went to French Equatorial Africa (now the country of Gabon) to set up a clinic and practice medicine there in the early part of the 20th century. Dr. Schweitzer explained that in this parable--he heard this message: although the rich man, representing Europe, had access to medical care; Lazarus, representing Africa, did not. Hearing this message in this parable changed the course of his life—and the many he treated and trained in Africa.ⁱ

Enslaved Africans here in our country in the 19th century heard a different message in this parable. It inspired one of them to create the song, *“Rock-A My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham.”* This is one of the many “Sorrow Songs” W. E. B. Dubois describes in his book, *The Souls of Black Folks*--Songs which exposed the injustices of this world, while holding hope of vindication in this life as well as the next. The particular image on which the song, *“Rock-A My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham.”* turns, was where Jesus paints the picture of the rich man down in Hades looking up and seeing Father Abraham with poor man Lazarus by his side (as our NRSV translation reads) but in the King James Version translated, by Abraham’s *bosom*.ⁱⁱ

This parable changed the course of Albert Schweizer’s life, and it gave deep solace, perhaps even helped to keep the spirits alive of demeaned and diminished people forced to a life of slavery. Today, I wonder what we will hear? This is the fifth of five parables, the grand finale of the parables Jesus spun out—all in response to the religious elites grumbling about the savory characters they saw Jesus sharing bread with. By this time, I think Jesus was having some fun. He was definitely on a roll. You may recall, he started on this riff with the parables of the lost sheep, lost coin, winding up with the elaborate story of the lost son. Then he told the odd and confusing one about the dishonest or shrewd manager who changed sides.

That fourth parable, in Luke 16:1, began with the very same phrase as today’s parable: “There was a rich man who...” Only today’s text almost sounds like the set up for a joke, “A rich man and a poor man walk into the afterlife...”ⁱⁱⁱ But then a rich man with no name, a “a natty nobody” goes to... hell? (that’s not the way it works) and a poor man is given a name, “Lazarus” the “surprised somebody” who gets an angel escort straight to the bosom of Abraham? Wait, what? Now Jesus has their attention. His caricature sketches of these two polar opposite men are almost funny, except for the way the story ends. And the way it points back to us. Where are we in this story? Let us listen now for God’s message to us.

Sermon:

34-27. I'm not talking about a chapter and verse in the Bible. 34-27 was the final score in the defeat the Packers suffered to the Philadelphia Eagles on Thursday night. What happened? It's always hard to say. But no one holds back from weighing in. So many theories, so little time. I read that it was the, "Turnovers that tilted the field." According to the Packers Wire, "Despite all the other noise, two turnovers by the Packers ultimately decided the game.

"The first happened with just a couple minutes left in the first half. On second down, Rodgers got strip-sacked by Derek Barnett after Barnett beat Mercedes Lewis on what looked like play-action. The turnover gave the Eagles the football at the 19-yard line, where they needed just four plays to take the 21-13 lead. The backbreaker came down with just seconds left on the clock. With Green Bay needing a touchdown to tie the game, Eagles linebacker Nigel Bradham picked off a deflected pass to end the threat.^{iv}

If only there had been more time. But there were only seconds left on the clock and then it was too late. When it comes to a game of football, basketball or soccer, we understand about the clock. In those games, the clock is what makes it fun, exciting, suspenseful. In Luke 16, Jesus is trying to warn any who would listen because he knew *his clock was running out*, he was well into his fourth quarter on earth, after which he would be nailed to a cross and crucified. So, he tells this story that would be funny if it weren't so tragic: about the rich man who dies and gets the first-class ticket to Hades and not heaven. Can't you just hear him mumbling to himself, "Surely there must have been some mix up. Who booked this ticket anyway? You just can't get good help these days. Where are my fixers? OK, Lazarus I guess those sores of yours aren't that contagious after all. Hey, Father Abraham, a little help down here? You can go ahead and send Lazarus... considering the circumstances, he'll do."

Abraham responds and calls him, "Child," in the same way the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son speaks to his first-born child, calling him, "Son" when the elder brother is spitting mad about the party underway for his loser younger brother. However, Abraham *does not* show the rich man mercy. Abraham says to the now tormented rich man, essentially, "Child...game over. The clock has run out on your chance to make things right. The gap you failed to see before you died, much less try to bridge, the chasm between your life of luxury, and Lazarus' life of torment, that gap is now fixed and final: no one can cross it. You are stuck on the wrong side. You had your chance, but now it is too late for you. Game over.

Still the rich man doesn't get it! Did you notice how even when the rich man is in Hades, writhing with pain in the midst of burning flames, he is still treating Lazarus like nothing more than a valet or slave, "Send Lazarus to use his finger to cool my tongue." When Abraham soundly rejected this idea, his next request *still* making Lazarus run an errand for him. But even that errand has nothing to do with righting the injustices of his former life. Not at all, that errand is all about taking care of his own family, his five brothers. "Please, send Lazarus to warn my brothers, before it's too late for them." You can see how Jesus is really pouring it on here in this fifth parable. He is trying to get their attention, those religious elites, invested in keeping things as they are.

We know what happened, having been born about 2,000 years this side of the cross. Jesus and everyone there that day knew what had happened to Israel, 700 years after the Babylonian exile—despite stern warnings from the prophet Amos. Here we are in 2019 with the gap widened out to where in 2018 less than 1% of the world’s population owns 45% of the world’s wealth.^v What kind of warning will it take for us, now? Someone *has* risen from the dead. And not just anyone. God raised Jesus from the dead.

That’s why we’re here today. God does give us another chance to get it right—while there is still time on the clock. Where are we in the story? Jesus has made the rich man so rich and ridiculous, “nothing nattier in Nazareth”^{vi} and the poor man, Lazarus, so pitifully poor and pathetic, we don’t really see ourselves in either of those two characters. Besides they are dead, and here we are alive, Thanks be to God. So yes, in this story, I think Jesus wants us to see ourselves as the five brothers, or five *siblings*—a more inclusive translation of the Greek word, *adelphoi*. Yes, sisters: we are not off the hook here.

The good news is that the clock has not run out for us, siblings. Jesus is giving us the chance, as Pastor Jill Duffield has written, “to be the people in this world who recognize the humanity and belovedness of Lazarus and treat him accordingly. Jesus *wants us* to be the people who seek equity for those the world steps over: the ones who are hungry, the ones with open sores at the gates. Yes, the ones the world relegates to the margins, the borders, to tent cities and overcrowded detention centers.”^{vii}

Yes, siblings, our wealth and our time on earth are gifts from God to bridge the gap, each dollar and each day we are given. Our short time on this earth is our chance chance to link arms across the chasm of the widening opportunity gap. This parable commands a response. We know how this parable affected Albert Schweizer and some African-American slaves. How will it change us? As a church here are some of the ways we are responding:

- This afternoon we are participating in our 29th CROP WALK to stop hunger. This is one small way to help feed the hungry at our gates here and all over the world.
- Next Sunday, our Peace & Global Witness Special Offering animates projects that locally and globally the bridge the gap for people of all ages.
- This fall our Outreach Committee has spearheaded a new group we are calling the Interfaith Network of Care (INC) that will host a potluck on October 24. The INC seeks to gather communities of faith across our Marshfield area and link us together along with those agencies in town who are addressing the needs and causes of poverty here in Marshfield. More to come on this.
- Just this Tuesday, our session said, “yes” to the call to become a “Matt 25 Church” and accepted the invitation from our denomination to adopt this bold vision. Our focus will be to “eradicate systemic poverty,” responding to Jesus’ message here in Luke 16. Much more to come on this.

Next Sunday, the Packers get a whole new chance, four full quarters, to face off against the Dallas Cowboys. We don’t have to wait until next Sunday. Our clock is running as I speak. Amen.

ⁱ Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*, (Harper One: New York, NY, 2014), p.337.

ⁱⁱ Nancy Lynn Westfield, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*, Edited by Green, Long, Powery & Rigby, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2019), p. 354.

ⁱⁱⁱ Brian McLaren, Sermon on Luke 16:1-31, “Scaring the Hell Out of Rich Folk,” preached May 15, 2019 at Festival of Homiletics, Minneapolis, MN.

^{iv} <https://packerswire.usatoday.com/2019/09/27/5-takeaways-from-packers-34-27-loss-to-eagles/>

^v Kathryn M. Schifferdecker, workingpreacher.org, September 22, 2019.

^{vi} Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*, (Harper One: New York, NY, 2014), p.272, The title of my sermon comes from this phrase of Amy-Jill Levine’s.

^{vii} Jill Duffield, Presbyterian Outlook, <https://pres-outlook.org/2019/09/16th-sunday-after-pentecost-september-29-2019/>