

# Sermon

October 16, 2016 | Luke 16:19-31 | Peter Lane

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The Rich Man and Lazarus. Oh, what a great story. A wealthy guy lives in a beautiful Kenwood house surrounded by an ornate, wrought iron fence. He wears Burberry clothes. He has a sneaker collection that includes at least one pair of every version of Air Jordans. Every day for lunch he eats something from the prepared foods section of Whole Foods. A poor guy lays at his gate. He has Hepatitis C and a bad case of Shingles. He would love to eat the ample Whole Foods leftovers but the garbage cans are locked in the garage. He is only appreciated by the neighborhood dogs. Both men die. Their luck switches. Our rich man is in agony and pleads for mercy. He gets a clear response, "No mercy. You should have known."

This story has inspired wonderful art. How do you like the 11th century sequence of images on your bulletin cover? Yikes!

Let's dive into the hot button issues.

First, hell. Does this passage describe the afterlife? Let me tell you my position on hell. I'm with the Paul we read in Romans 8:38-40 who is convinced that nothing "will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." So, no, I do not read this as a description of the afterlife. It is a provocative morality tale with caricatures to make a point.

Enough with hell. How about wealth? Is it evil to be rich? No. Luke uses the phrase "a certain rich man" in Luke three times. Each time it evokes a negative image of excess, isolation, and unchecked extravagance (Sherouse). If those were the only stories, wealth would seem inherently bad. But other Luke stories assume wealth in a positive way. Think of the Samaritan with enough money to promise the inn keeper he would pay for any expenses or the father in the Prodigal Son story.

Let's stop and have a progress report. So far I have proposed that there is no hell (at least not a populated one) and it is ok to be rich. Goodness gracious. It is starting to sound like interpretation as self-protection! This vivid story must warn us against something. Oh, it certainly does. It certainly does.

What is the Certain Rich Man's problem? His problem is that he does not see. He does not see Lazarus and he does not see the scriptures which would have aimed his gaze at Lazarus. As Bob Dillon sings, "How many times can a man turn his head / and

pretend that he just doesn't see?" The Certain Rich Man does not see. It doesn't mean he doesn't notice Lazarus. Tormented in Hades, he remembers the poor guy's name when he needs something. "Lazarus?" "Sorry man, day late and a dollar short." But What prevents the Rich Man from seeing Lazarus in his full humanity? Wealth. Is it wrong to be rich? No. Is it wrong to not see people in their full humanity? Yes. Can iron gates and mansions and succulent dinners blind us to the poor in our midst? Yes. Although putting it that way makes it seem like this morality tale might be aimed only at the 1% of our imaginations. Remember that to be in the 1% globally takes far less income. Our lifestyles blind us to the poor and the sick so that we do not see them. Beware. Beware.

The scriptures are there to tell us, along with the rich man's brothers, that we must see Lazaruses of the world—the sick and poor, the widow and orphan, the immigrant and the dispossessed. We must see.

How can we see?

We should cultivate common decency, making eye contact and speaking to those we encounter outside our doors.

How can we see?

We should work on alleviating their suffering. You all in this parish does so much of that: Food Pantry, Garden, Open Kitchen, Haiti lunch program.

How can we see?

Politics. Politics is a means of us to see the Lazaruses of the world. Pope Francis says, "Politics...is one of the highest forms of charity, because it serves the common good." Politics is the way we decide how to structure our communities. Politics is the means towards the common good. Through politics we can try to create a society where suffering is alleviated on a large systemic scale. Mike Hogue, in his interesting talk last week, used the upstream/downstream story. There is a village on a river. One day a kid struggling in the water floats by. The villagers rescue the kid. The next day two kids. Again, they rescue. The next day, more and more. They create a rescue force. Then one day, someone suggests going upstream to figure out why all of these kids are in the water. Upstream. Find a systemic solution. Politics. God bless individual

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charity. We cannot be fully alive if we do not engage in daily or weekly acts of charity. Bring a canned good for the pantry. Drop a dollar in the salvation army bucket. But let's also look upstream. That is politics. The church must be involved in politics.

OK, but should I preach politics from the pulpit? Especially one week before kicking off a capital campaign and asking for money? Of course. Politics is the highest form of charity. Jesus was deeply political. He cared how we treat one another. He cared about the plight of the poor. The church must consider politics.

Should we be partisan? Well, the way our society is set up, the government has bought us off in a way, given us strong financial incentive not to be partisan. Our parish doesn't have to pay taxes. You can deduct your gifts. In return we don't advocate for specific candidates. But there is another reason not to be partisan. Creating policy to ensure human flourishing is difficult. Think of the plastic bag ban in this city. It was well-intentioned but actually led to thicker plastic bags being distributed. The church must be involved in articulating the ends to which politics should aim. There can be very legitimate disagreement on the means. And finally, political parties sometimes seem to want doctrinal rigidity. A Christian politics will often cut across party platforms. So, to me, the Church and the preacher must dance on the line of being strongly political while avoiding partisanship.

What are Christian politics? What ends should we pursue in the voting booth? Our scripture about the Rich Man and Lazarus offers one obvious principal. We need a society where all are seen in their full humanity. When we interpret reports on GDP or income growth, we should dig in and learn how the bottom 20% is fairing. When we hear reports on the state of our healthcare system, we should wonder how that care is experienced by an injured combat veteran. When new taxes are proposed, we should wonder how it will impact the economies of the poorest neighborhoods. Jesus cared for all people; I have no doubt about that. But he seemed to have special attention for the ones made other by society, whose full humanity is hidden, out of sight: women, immigrants, the poor, the sick, African-Americans, the widow, poor rural whites. And on and on. Luke is a gospel full of images of overturning. Might our politics follow Luke's example? Should we not vote for candidates who aspire to make society work better for those

unseen in their full humanity? Robert Kuttner, in a recent article about the decline of the white working class argues that "populism gains adherence whenever mainstream parties let ills fester." Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump show the rise of populism. And that means that the mainstream parties have let ills fester. We voters have not seen enough people in their full humanity.

So who should you vote for? For judges and Water Reclamation District and the like I recommend downloading the Independent Voters of Illinois or some other group's recommendations so you know which ones haven't met the grade. For Alderman and Senate and in-between, read their policies with an eye towards which ones will help build a society where the poor and sick like Lazarus are not ignored and made invisible. Which ones will help us live together in a way that honors everyone's full humanity?

I think some choices between candidates are very difficult, because they share these general ends and differ on the means. But some choices are downright easy. A candidate who doesn't notice the Lazaruses of the world? Who mistreats Lazarus? Who mocks Lazarus? Who plays on people's fears of Lazarus? Whose policies intend to keep Lazarus in the shadows? Who doesn't do the daily acts of common decency towards Lazarus?

Don't vote for him.

Sources:

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Robert Kuttner. "Hidden Injuries of Class, Race, and Culture: The decline of the white working class and the rise of the Tea party and Donald Trump." *The American Prospect*. October 3, 2016.

Michael Jordan Laskey. "A Good Catholic Meddles in Politics." *Church Life Journal*. September 28, 2016.

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