

**Pastor Mollies Sermon**  
**September 29, 2019**  
**Luke 16:19-31 and 1 Timothy 6:11-19**

Have you ever felt “less than”??

Like you’re not good enough?

Have you experienced a distance between you and your coworkers or friends because of the way they treat you or a story that they may share?

Or, conversely, have you ever caught yourself treating someone else as if they are not a beloved child of God?

These are some of the questions that I want us to consider as we navigate our time together this morning.

I want you to consider these questions as we examine “empathy” and if it is something that can be taught.

As we have been doing with many of our parables of Jesus in the past few weeks, let’s break this lesson of Jesus down a bit:

Who are the characters in the story?

A rich man.

How do we know he is rich? (yes...that’s what Jesus tells us...but more specifically he was dressed in purple and fine linen and ate very well.)

Who else?

Lazarus.

Is this the same Lazarus that is a friend of Jesus? Most biblical scholars can agree that they are not the same - it was a common name at the time.

Here’s what we do know about him:

He’s poor.

He’s covered in sores (which dogs lick).

He sits outside of the gates of the house of the rich man.

He’s hungry...willing to eat even crumbs that come from the table of the rich man.

So shortly after we are introduced to these men, we find out that both of them die.

Lazarus goes to heaven and hangs out with Father Abraham enjoying all that his earthly dwelling didn’t provide. Lazarus has never had this experience before.

The rich man goes to Hades, and, as it says in the story, is on the other side of the chasm and is being tormented all the while able to see Lazarus living the good life.

Sadly, the rich man is none the wiser for his death experience, still acting as a little king, though wearing no crown, ordering Abraham to order Lazarus to serve him.

First, the rich man seeks Abraham, requesting that Lazarus help him because he is “in agony with the flames”.

Abraham’s response? Um...sorry. No.

After the first rebuke, the rich man pleas again: send Lazarus to get word to my brothers that this is what is in store for them if they don’t change their ways while there on earth.

This is the first compassion that we have seen, but it is still deceptively mixed with manipulation.

Abraham’s response to that request? Again...no.

The rich man still doesn’t view Lazarus as anything else than a way to get what he wants - a means to an end.

The rich man is continuing to desire to use Lazarus as an object for his own purposes. Even after death, as the rich man gazes across the abyss to see Lazarus comfortably hanging out with Abraham, he *still* speaks of the poor man in the third person - as if he wasn't there.

About this passage, biblical scholar Scott Bader-Sayes writes, "This text presents us with the great moral challenge of seeing, and then making visible, the invisible suffering of the world.

"Indeed, this may be one of our most important moral challenges today. Our global network of communication allows us to be more aware of the world's suffering than ever before, but we have become adept at ignoring the suffering that is right at our doorstep. Maybe, in fact, these two things are connected; the more we become voyeurs upon the faraway sufferings of others, the more impotent we feel to do anything about pain and injustice. Despair and cynicism tempt us to close our eyes to suffering and shut down our overloaded sympathies."

As you think about your own part in certain scenarios, think now about organizations you support...or when you've been compelled and called to send support and aid relief to one of the more recent natural disasters around the world?

Was the rich man shut down to overloaded sympathies? I really think not.

But what about Abraham? Was he? His response to the rich man's request seemed kind of...well...cold.

It wasn't cold but, instead, ambiguous.

Abraham simply stated that if the rich man's brothers couldn't figure it out with all of the ways they have been taught to do it before, then there isn't hope for them - they, like us, need to figure it out on their own through the teachings having been provided to them and the people surrounding them.

Compassion has surfaced as an important value at several points in Luke's gospel, variously ascribed to Jesus, to the good Samaritan, and to the prodigal's waiting Father.

Could it be that not having compassion is one sure sign of being lost?

Even more, might Jesus be warning that riches can stunt our compassion by insulating us from the need of others?

Maybe this is the tie back to Jesus' pronouncement that one cannot love both God and wealth a few verses earlier.

To love God is to love neighbor, the one in need.

Perhaps the chasm that separates the rich man and Lazarus in death only echoes the one that separated them in life.

And while Lazarus' comfort in the bosom of Abraham is the reversal of fortune promised at the outset of Luke's Gospel, maybe the rich man's torment is the isolation from human compassion he has lived with all of his life made now painfully manifest.

Abraham's words to the rich man suggest that stepping out of one's privilege is perhaps one of the most difficult journeys of transformation. Two chapters ahead, Jesus will compare it to getting a camel through a needle's eye.

This parable, while able to teach us many things, can assist us today in heeding caution when NOT being aware of and taking care of one another.

When our own selfish ambitions and - in the words of the 1st Timothy passage - haughtiness, setting hopes on the uncertainty of riches...

Regardless of what we may look like, one to another, we are all children of God.

We are marked with a sign of the cross on our foreheads, thanks to our baptisms.

For those who aren't marked - why does it matter?

Shouldn't we be treating one another by the Golden Rule - how we would want to be treated?

It seems sad that some might need to see something as blatant as a tattoo or something of the like in order to recognize - first and foremost - that they, too, are a child of God?

That it doesn't matter what class or culture or background they may have...Lazarus and the Rich Man are both children of God...The rich man never acknowledged it nor did he understand the lesson.

What does it take to us to recognize the value and worth of another person's situation, circumstance, and story?

I was fortunate enough to sit with a group of women in ministry earlier this week.

We all shared stories and experiences within our ministry contexts and others that our colleagues have had during our lives.

During our time together, I was reminded that while there can be many obstacles I may face in my life and ministry, there are others who have even more to overcome:

Women of color.

People of color.

Members of the GLBTQIA+ community

Current seminary students - particularly women - who face similar obstacles.

I can hear their stories and share them - not as my own, but as a way to provide voice within my place of privilege as a white female to allow those other voices to be heard.

We left our time together wondering how we can encourage each other - as well as our male counterparts - to use their voices to speak for those who are not being heard.

By sharing our stories...our vulnerability...- one with another - we are able to be a part of transformation that helps narrow the space of the chasms between us.

We can't share our stories unless we truly see each other and talk to each other.

Listening to people that may look, sound, smell, live and appear different than us can open us up to ways to be connected, one to another.

Ways to be connected and build empathy.

Empathy. Not sympathy.

About the two, author and modern-day theologian Brene Brown writes, "Empathy and sympathy are often grouped together, but they are very different. Empathy is a skill that can bring people together and make people feel included, while sympathy creates an uneven power dynamic and can lead to more isolation and disconnection. It's an unfortunate outcome given that sympathy is usually coming from a good place.

"Empathy fuels connection. Sympathy drives disconnection."

If we are able to learn from the parable while also remembering that we are to be "rich in good works, generous, and ready to share" like the passage in 1st Timothy tells us, then we are to find ourselves only able to grow as people.

It seems to me that part of what is at stake in Jesus' parable is the link between our wellbeing and that of others. If we cannot feel compassion for others we have lost something that is deeply and genuinely human.

In time, the wealth that has numbed us to the need of our neighbor deludes us into imagining that we ourselves have no need, are sufficient unto ourselves, and can easily substitute hard work and a little luck for grace and mercy. At that point, we are, indeed, lost.

But I think the reverse is also true -- that as we become more responsive to the hurts, hopes, and needs of others,

we become more acutely aware of our own humanity, of our own longings and insufficiency and thereby can appreciate God's offer of manifest grace in Christ, the one who took on our need, our humanity, our lot and our life, all in order to show us God's profound love for each and all of us. And that, siblings in Christ, is something that I think we can share with all.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.