10-29/30-16 Rev. Amy Haines

Luke 16:19-31 “A Word from the Dead?”

Welcome to Halloween weekend in the United States— where kids of all ages allow their imaginations to run wild, transforming themselves into characters cute to creepy to everything in-between. I confess that Halloween is not one of my favorite holidays, although I do enjoy seeing the variety of costumes during Trick or Treat and Halloween parades. I am fascinated by the creativity of some children and their parents, who clearly create their own costumes. Over the years I have seen a vending machine and a family of M & Ms and a hot air balloon. I love the adorable Minnie Mouses and princesses, the little Marios and train conductors. I am also disturbed by the many costumes that come from the horror film genre, with their bloody faces, zombie stares and Freddie Krueger masks. I guess there is so much real violence in this world that –personally– I don’t need to imagine more violence in my movies, games or Halloween costumes. I don’t need to be scared at a haunted house or haunted hayride. Michael Jackson’s Thriller video was scary enough for me—I don’t need to watch The Walking Dead to see how zombies have evolved over the years.

The zombies, however, are here to stay, I am afraid, as a pop culture phenomenon. How many movies have now been made where the undead take over the world and only the hardy survive the breakdown of society? How many movies have been made where a few heroes save the world from total extinction at the hands of aliens, transformers or natural disasters?

In the end, we want to see our world survive. In the end, we want to see the goodness of humanity.

In the end, we want to still have a glimpse of hope for a better tomorrow.

That is true for a movie ending, that is true for real life, and that is true as well for our gospel story today.

The rich man yearned to save his brothers from his surprising fate. For in death, he found himself in Hades, in hell, in the last place he expected to be. And he wished for a word from the dead to save his brothers.

Before we get to that part of the story, however, let us flashback to figure out how he got there in the first place.

The rich man is one of two characters in today’s parable from Jesus. Remember that parables were Jesus’ way of telling stories about the kingdom of God. Parables are similar to stories that begin with, “Once upon a time…” or “in a galaxy far, far away…” So the characters aren’t real. They are, however, realistic enough to be relatable so that they can teach us a lesson.

Today’s parable is unique to Luke, and introduces us to the rich man and Lazarus. These two are as opposite as any two persons can be. The rich man dressed expensively in purple cloth and fine linen, the best money could afford, lived in luxury behind a gated wall, and consumed whatever his heart desired. We can only imagine how his wealth controlled his faith. Maybe he only paid attention to the Scriptures that affirmed rather than challenged his life. The poor man named Lazarus spent his days outside the rich man’s gate, laid there by others to beg for the scraps of bread that were used as napkins at the rich man’s table. This poor man was covered in sores which the scavenger dogs would lick, so he was considered an unclean outcast who could never go near the Jewish Temple.

In the ancient world, wealth was seen as a gift from God, a symbol of divine favor. Poverty was seen as a divine curse, the result of sin in life. The Pharisees, the religious leaders of Jesus’ day, were seen as wealthy men, worthy of worship at the Temple. Those who lived in abject poverty, such as Lazarus, were often considered unclean due to some illness or struggle. Or people like Zacchaeus were seen as so corrupt as to be unclean.

And no one who was considered unclean was allowed anywhere near the holy Temple of God.

This clean/unclean dichotomy logically then played out in the afterlife. Our ancestors believed that those who were clean would go to heaven, and those who were unclean would go to hell.

Yet in a sudden twist in today’s parable, when Lazarus died he was taken to Abraham’s side in heaven, and when the rich man died he was taken to the fires of hell. This unexpected twist would have shocked Jesus’ first hearers to their core. They anticipated the opposite.

“Yet Abraham said to the rich man, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received good things, whereas Lazarus received terrible things. Now Lazarus is being comforted and you are in great pain.” (v.25)

Not easy words to hear then, and certainly not easy words for us to hear today.

Many times in the Gospel of Luke the rich are challenged and the poor are comforted in the parables concerning the kingdom of God. Even when Jesus was still in the womb, Mary was exulting that the hungry have been filled and the rich sent empty away. (1:46-55) In his inaugural sermon, Jesus declared he was anointed by the Spirit to bring good news to the poor. (4:18) In the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus tells the poor that they are favored by God even as he warns the rich. (6:20-25)

Today’s parable goes even deeper than challenging the rich and comforting the poor. Rather, this parable goes to the heart—does the rich man see Lazarus, and in seeing the poor, does he have compassion on the hungry beggar? Do we who are rich according to the world’s standards heed God’s call to first see, and then have compassion on the poor around us? Ironically, or dare I say intentionally, Lazarus is the only character ever given a name by Jesus in all of his parables. In every other story that Jesus tells he simply uses descriptive adjectives or simple nouns—the good Samaritan, a shepherd, a shrewd manager, a father, a certain man…

Lazarus is the only character ever named, and I believe that is intentional.

How often do we overlook the poor as “faceless people with no stories?”

(Scott Hoezee 9-19-16 cep.calvinseminary.edu)

We lump the poor into a faceless group instead of seeing them as men and women with unique yet common struggles and stories. Each and every one of the poor, and each and every one of us, has a back story. How did we get here? How did they get where they are today? What have been the struggles of life? What are the hopes of life?

When we label people with the broad stroke of a specific socio-economic category, we ignore their unique humanness, and when we ignore their unique humanness, we ignore them as real people. When we ignore them as real people, then we don’t really see them.

Janet Hunt once shared her experience of her mother not being seen when she had to take her to an eye appointment. She says, “We were sitting in the waiting room. I was turned towards my mother, visiting quietly, when I was interrupted by the woman sitting across from me. She was looking at us with delight in her eyes, but one did not have to look hard to see the sadness just below the surface. “Is this your mother?” she asked me.

“She is,” I replied. “Oh,” she said, “I thought so. You remind me of my sister with our mother. Mom died last year.”

She went on to share her name and spoke of all of her siblings. And what a hard year it had been. Honestly, though, while I felt for her, I was relieved that she got called quickly back for her own appointment, for never once in our exchange did she acknowledge my mother at all — except as one to talk about. Yes, she saw her, but it seemed she only saw her as an extension of or as a reminder of her own loss. Not as the remarkable person she is. This became evident as she directed all of her conversation at me. And it made me uncomfortable.

 (Janet Hunt dancingwiththeword.com 9-18-16)

Once on spring break in high school, the Black Mountain Presbyterian Church youth group went to the Church of the Pilgrimage in Washington, DC. One evening they brought in a handful of homeless and formerly homeless men to tell their stories. One student asked a man what to do when a person on the street approached him asking for money. He said that we should do what we felt like doing. If we give them money, be fully aware, he said, that it may be used for food, but just as well may be used for something else. He said to follow your gut as you make that decision. Then he added the critical point: “Say, 'yes,' or say, 'no,' but treat me like a person, he said. We spend our whole day not being seen. Do not act like we aren't there.”

 (Chris Tuttle “Blindness and a Vision of Community” 9-29-13 day1.org, Adapted)

The rich man acted as if Lazarus was invisible. He never really saw this beggar at his gate. Or did he?

In another sudden twist in the parable, the rich man knew Lazarus by name! Yet knowing his name did not mean that he truly saw him.

We can infer from the rich man’s words that while he knew Lazarus’ name, he never saw him as more than a useless beggar, an object to be ignored, a lowly nobody like his servants to be ordered around to do his bidding.

The rich man never saw Lazarus as a human being, as a man like himself, as a beloved child of God.

In 1965 Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke at Montreat, a conference center in the mountains of North Carolina.

He spoke on this text, and claims that, "Dives [the name history has given to the rich man], he went to hell not because he was rich, but because he passed by Lazarus every day and never really saw him."

King moves on to say that, "Dives went to hell because he allowed Lazarus to become invisible...because he failed to use his wealth to bridge the gulf that separated him from his brother Lazarus. In fact, he didn't even realize that Lazarus was his brother."

(Chris Tuttle “Blindness and a Vision of Community” 9-29-13 day1.org)

When the rich man could not see Lazarus as a living, breathing, fellow human being, he could not have compassion on him.

How often in our world today do we not see the beloved children of God around us? We walk by those in desperate need without ever seeing them, without any intention to ever hear their story. This is not intentional; it is the result of our conditioning and our busy-ness. I admit that there are times when I am skeptical of the expressed need of someone who shows up at the church or someone I pass by on the street.

How often in our world today do we see a lack of value for human life- from the womb, to the home, to the playground, to the boardroom, to the nursing home? We neglect to really see one another as human beings loved by God and created in God’s image.

The rich man’s sin was not being rich. The rich man’s sin was the lack of the love of neighbor, which goes hand in hand with the love of God.

When we become so consumed by our possessions, when we become so consumed by the drive for more money, when we become so consumed by keeping up our social standing, we will miss the value of relationships with those around us, family, friend, neighbor and stranger.

..In that same speech in Montreat, Martin Luther King, Jr. continues:

"I submit this is the challenge facing the church, to be as concerned as our Christ about the least of these, our brothers and sisters. And we must do it because in the final analysis we are all to live together, rich and poor, lettered and unlettered, tutored and untutored. Somehow we are tied in a single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality." "And for some reason," King says to us, "I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be.

This is the way God made the world...we must all learn to live together as brothers [and sisters] or we will all perish as fools." (Chris Tuttle “Blindness and a Vision of Community” 9-29-13 day1.org)

When we are so consumed by our riches and our schedules, our possessions and our pleasure, will even a word from the dead save us? A word from our faith ancestors? A word from the Lord?

The rich man yearned to save his brothers from his surprising fate. Hades, or hell, separated from God, was the last place he expected to be for eternity. So he called upon Father Abraham to raise Lazarus from the dead and send him to his five brothers, to warn them about life and death so that they may not find themselves in hell. Abraham refused. Seeing and hearing a dead man would be a miracle, yet as Abraham said, “neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.” (v.31)

How much our world today loves miracles—they make the news, they gain a following, they feed our emotions, they lighten up our imaginations. Yet miracles do not really save us. They feed our emotions but not our need for God. They fascinate us but usually do not lead to spiritual growth and transformation.

Think of the examples from the Scriptures.

\*The history of Israel is an ongoing cycle of miracle and repentance followed by retreat into sin followed by miracle and repentance followed by retreat into sin.

\*Jesus was tempted by Satan to throw himself off the top of the Temple so angels could rescue him and people would follow Jesus as the newest miracle. Jesus refused.

\*Even when Jesus performed miracles of healing and fish and calming the wind and waves people were fascinated yet did not turn to God in belief.

Miracles may get our attention, but they do not build our faith. That is where God’s Word and the Church come in. When we are serious about faith, when we make a serious commitment to worship, Bible study, fellowship and prayer, only then do we realize that the Bible is still relevant to our lives today. Only when we open ourselves to Moses, the prophets, the gospels and the letters of the early church do we begin to understand all that God has done and continues to do for us, His children. Miracles may fascinate us, but a dynamic faith will move beyond miracles to the message of Scripture and apply that living message to both our personal and public lives.

We here today believe that Jesus is risen from the dead, and only through his life, death and resurrection are we saved from hell and given the opportunity to spend eternity in heaven. But how many in our world today are still skeptical of Jesus, still doubt that Jesus is the son of God, still doubt that Jesus rose from the dead, still doubt that there even is a literal heaven and hell?

..L. H. Appel was a popular revival preacher years ago. He often used one favorite sermon wherever he went.

He would announce that toward the end of the revival he would be preaching on “Three people in this church I would like to see go to hell.” He would promote the sermon and joke about the title all week long. A crowd would usually show up just out of curiosity.
When the night came for the sermon, he would say something like this.

“There are three people in this church I would like to see go to hell! In fact, there are a lot more than that. I would like to see the elders go to hell. And the deacons. And the Sunday School teachers. And many of the parents. I would like to see them all go to hell. I would like to see them stay there for about five minutes and then come back. I know one thing for sure. When they come back, they will never be the same again. They will have a new zeal for sharing the gospel. They will have a new determination to live for Christ. If folk in this church just visited hell or really believed in it, they would never be same again!”

Pastor Roger Thomas goes on to say,
“Did you see the transformation of the rich man in the parable? The reality of hell created a desire to spare his brothers his fate. What might happen to us and our church if we had that same kind of zeal to pray for the lost and make sure our friends and family knew how to avoid eternal judgment?”

(Roger Thomas, 4-06, sermoncentral.com)

Peter Gomes reminds us that the story is a cautionary tale, telling us that it is not yet too late for us. It may be too late for the five brothers, but it does not have to be for the rest of us. So, what is the bottom line? Jesus is challenging us to get our acts together *now*! We are challenged to listen to the gospel and hear it, and then act on it in whatever ways we can. “Here it is in clear color,” says Gomes: “God does not expect you to do the impossible, but God does expect you to do both what you can and what you must.””

 (Gomes, Peter J. *Strength for the Journey*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2003, 244-245. 9-26-04 Homiletics.com)

We are not given a word from the dead today—instead we are given a word from the living. Jesus who once was dead is now alive. We can trust in his Word, from Moses to the Prophets to the Gospels to the letters. We can trust in the Holy Spirit to open our ears to hear, our hearts to care, our lives to serve.

Once again Jesus calls us to live by God’s kingdom ways of not only loving our God yet also loving our neighbor. How we live out this call, how we live out what we believe here and now, will determine our eternal futures long before we take our last breath.

We are the brothers –and sisters– of the rich man, those he seeks to warn. We are the audience of Jesus, being warned how to care for one another, and how to use the riches we have been blessed with to live by God’s kingdom ways.

May we heed this wake up call to live by faith, to live by hope, to care for all, as we follow a crucified and risen Savior and Lord.

May it be so. Let us pray.