

Sermon for Sunday, September 25, 2016

JUST OUTSIDE

Let us pray:

Holy God, by the power of your spirit, quiet our minds and open our hearts, that we might hear the good news you have for us today and go out ready to respond with great joy. This we ask in the name of Jesus Christ, who is our rock, and our redeemer, amen.

As human beings, I think it's safe to say, we have an innate, hardwired desire to discern, who's "in" and who's "out"...but for the author of Luke, God's kingdom is different—it isn't made up of the usual suspects like those who are religiously pure and people who observe the law perfectly, or those people who seem to have it all together and never make a mistake...

According to Luke, through the ministry of Christ, we learn that God welcomes everyone; fishermen, tax collectors, prostitutes, Roman soldiers and centurions, and yes even the religious elite—in fact it seems as though everyone Jesus encounters is offered an invitation to come and experience life in God's kingdom.

However this isn't always a welcome message.

In today's text, Jesus is telling the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus to a group of people known as the Pharisees—The Pharisees were a religious group who carefully observed Jewish laws—they were known for being pious—they knew the Torah backwards and forwards, they made the right sacrifices in the temple at the right time, observed the Sabbath faithfully and dedicated their lives to following every religious code...in their minds, the Pharisees were "in".

But then Jesus came along and threw everything off balance...

The story begins with introductions: "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen" In his book *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes*, Kenneth Bailey writes that "purple cloth was extremely expensive, and only the truly wealthy could afford it."¹ Not only that but "fine linen" is a reference to quality Egyptian cotton...which was "used for the best undergarments."² Not only did this man wear purple everyday, but in case you were curious—he also had the best underwear.

I think Jesus was having some fun with this story...

But while the rich man was covered in purple, the poor man was covered in sores...

And while the rich man feasted sumptuously every day, the poor man wished to eat the scraps that fell from the rich man's table.

¹ Kenneth Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes* (Downers Grove; IVP, 2008), 382.

² Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 382.

While the rich man could afford servants, the poor man depended on others and laid at the rich man's gate...

The Rich Man could have easily obeyed the Sabbath and kept the laws, but the poor man was unclean and the town dogs came to lick his sores.

These two men could not be more different.

Except there is a catch...

While the rich man is portrayed as the one who is powerful and deserves our attention, it's the poor man who's given a name... In his commentary on Luke, Justo Gonzalez says this "Normally it is the important people who have a name. They have recognition. They are somebody. But in the parable the rich and apparently important man has no name, and the poor and insignificant man does."³ Jesus gives him the name, Lazarus—which means "God helps".

It's here that a reversal occurs. Both Lazarus and the rich man die. But Lazarus was carried off by the angels and the rich man was buried...

In the afterlife the rich man finds himself in Hades being tormented—but he looks up and there, in the distance he sees Father Abraham—the patriarch of the Jewish faith, and next to him, the rich man sees a familiar face...the one who used to sit outside his gate day in and day out...and to our surprise, the rich man knows his name...Lazarus.

The Rich man cries out "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his figure in water and cool my tongue..."

But Abraham points out that there is a chasm—a divide that separates Hades from Heaven and no one is able to cross the divide.

So The Rich man begs Abraham to send Lazarus to his fathers house in order to warn the rich man's 5 brothers—he doesn't want them to have the same fate.

But Abraham points out that the rich man's brothers have Moses and the prophets, they can listen to them—because even if someone were to rise from the dead, they wouldn't listen...

The Rich Man had spent his life in luxury—dressing in purple, displaying his wealth for everyone to see, feasting every day—he surrounded himself with only the best stuff...what surprises me in this story is that, when he got to Hades, and he looked up, he knew the person standing next to Abraham...we don't know how, but we do know that the Rich Man not only recognized but called him by name...Lazarus...

I'm sure, the last person The Rich Man expected to see wrapped in a hug with Father Abraham—the patriarch of the Jewish faith—was Lazarus.

Through this parable Jesus reversed the roles that the Pharisees would have expected. The person with power and prestige somehow discovered himself in Hades, while the poor, powerless Lazarus was lifted up and seated next to Abraham...

³ Justo Ganzalez, Luke: Belief, a Theological Commentary on the Bible (Louisville; WJK, 2010), 195.

I have no doubt a few jaws dropped when Jesus told this story...But I don't think the primary message here is about role reversals and how if you suffer here on earth you will somehow have good things in the next life, or that if you are rich in this life you will suffer in the next.

That's not how God's kingdom works...Instead I think this story is about stewardship—that if we see that all we have and all of who we are is a gift from God—then we are called, not to use what we have in order to make ourselves comfortable—but in order to comfort others, and welcome them into the kingdom of God.

Because nowhere in this story does it say that the rich man was punished because of his wealth and the incredible resources at his disposal...instead it's because he hardened heart...

On August 17, an airstrike was carried out in the northern Syrian City of Aleppo. During that airstrike homes were destroyed and a young boy named Omran Daqneesh was rescued from the rubble. An aid worker carried Omran to the ambulance, and placed him on a bright orange seat—he sat silently as the aid worker left, attempting to find more survivors. The picture and video of Omran in the back of that ambulance went viral and it caught the attention of another little boy—who lives a whole world away in NY...

Touched by what he saw, Alex wrote a letter to President Obama,

“Dear Mr. President,

Remember the boy who was picked up by the ambulance in Syria? Can you please go get him and bring him to [my home]? Park in the driveway or on the street and we will be waiting for you guys with flags, flowers, and balloons. We will give him a family and he will be our brother. Catherine, my little sister, will be collecting butterflies and fireflies for him. In my school, I have a friend from Syria, Omar, and I will introduce him to Omar. We can all play together. We can invite him to birthday parties and he will teach us another language. We can teach him English too, just like my friend Aoto from Japan.

Please tell him that his brother will be Alex who is a very kind boy, just like him. Since he won't bring toys and doesn't have toys Catherine will share her big blue stripy white bunny. And I will share my bike and I will teach him how to ride it. I will teach him additions and subtractions in math. And he [can] smell Catherine's lip gloss penguin which is green. She doesn't let anyone touch it.

Thank you very much! I can't wait for you to come!

Alex
6 years old”

Right now, our world seems to be filled with fear and anxiety. Many of us have become jaded and overwhelmed with all the pain, suffering and injustice that we see here in St. Louis, across our country and around the world. We just want to back away, turn off the news, and disengage because the world's problems are just too big to solve. And yet, somehow, this 6 year old boy displays what the kingdom of God looks like. Alex offers everything he, and his sister have...(Although I wonder if Alex told his sister about sharing her bunny...)

What if the Rich Man had acted the same way?

When we take a serious look at our lives we realize just how much God has entrusted to each of us.

Ultimately we don't have to be just like the Rich Man, with more money than we know what to do with in order to welcome people into God's kingdom—because it's really about seeing the needs and injustice in our city, in our country and in our world, and realizing that we are called, as people who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior to step out... and proclaim the good news that everyone...EVERYONE is “in”...So..

When we hear stories of women, men and children fleeing their home countries because a rickety boat seems safer than the city they are leaving behind, and affords a brighter future—do our hearts break? Do our minds ask why? Do our hands look for ways to serve? Do our feet move into action?

When we watch yet another video of yet another black body being shot by the police— do our hearts break? Do our minds ask why? Do our hands look for ways to serve? Do our feet move into action?

Because just outside our doors there are people that God is calling us to serve. We each have our own Lazarus, a person we see as we drive home each day, a child in our class room who needs a friend, a coworker who's nervous about raising their voice and speaking up.

This story teaches us that our resources, all we have and all of who we are, is a gift from God—we are stewards of the resources we have...

So how are we going to use them?

I think this means we need to ask questions, both of ourselves and of the world around us; Are we willing to step out of the places where we are comfortable in order to have conversations that stretch and push us out of what we think we know? Are we willing to form new relationships, in order to learn about the needs in our city, across the country and around the world? Are we willing to listen and to allow our hearts to break?

Because in doing so, we are attempting, however flawed or broken, because yes, we will mess up, but we are attempting to extend the same love, grace, compassion and forgiveness that we have each experienced in Jesus Christ.

It's our turn, to look just outside our door and welcome others into the kingdom of God—because everyone is “in”. In the name of The Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In response to hearing the good news, let us respond by bringing forth our tithes and offerings.

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September 25, 2016
Luke 16.19-31