

Reverend Carol Peppers Wray  
Sunday, September 30, 2007

Sermon Text: Luke 16:19-31

And now, dear Lord, may the words of my mouth and may the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in Thy sight, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

My husband and I have a friend, who whenever you ask him, “How are you doing?” he always answers, “I have no regrets. Mrs. Carol, I have no regrets.” Well, Jesus told a parable about a man, who should have had some regrets. Some question if this is truly a parable because one of the characters is named. Jesus told the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man wore designer clothes. He even had designer underwear, no Fruit of the Loom for him! He had fine dining every meal. By all appearances, he had achieved the good life, the life of the rich and famous. Outside the gate of his home was Lazarus, a poor man. How poor was he? He was so poor that he waited for the crumbs from the rich man’s table. He had free medical care. The dogs licked his wounds. By all appearances, his life was a disaster. He was living the life of the down and out, and the only clue that there was something different in his life than what appeared on the outside was his name. Lazarus. We know that in Scripture names are important. Names tell us about the character of a person, and Lazarus means “God is my helper.”

The Pharisees to whom Jesus was telling this parable had been ridiculing Jesus about the parable that he had told that we looked at last week, the parable of the dishonest manager. Jesus had taught you cannot serve God and wealth. Well, they were ridiculing Jesus because that went totally against their theology of money. As they started listening to this story that Jesus told, they would have thought that the rich man was a man of God, blessed by God because he had a beautiful home and fancy clothes and gourmet food. They based their thinking upon some passages from the Old Testament such as the beginning of the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter of Deuteronomy, which promises that blessings shall come upon you and overtake you if you obey the Lord, your God. Or the first Psalm, which promises that the righteous will prosper, but the wicked will perish. To them material wealth was a sign of blessing by God. They did not know that the devil can also give material blessings. Doesn’t that health and wealth theology still exist even today, and perhaps even subtly in our own lives?

I remember the first time I went to the Bass Pro Shop in Myrtle Beach. Now, I had no idea what to expect from a store for fishermen! I wondered what the fuss was all about. I expected sporting goods and not much more. Well, the store was huge and overwhelming. There was even clothing for women, which my radar picked up almost immediately! The clothes weren’t just fishing vests and cargo pants. Very soon, an outfit caught my eye. It was Capri pants and a blouse. I walked over to look at it, and the price just about knocked me over. I was expecting something fairly inexpensive, but my radar must have picked up the most expensive thing in the store. As far as I was concerned, this outfit was too expensive, and I called everybody that was with me over to see the outfit just to show them how expensive it was! Imagine my surprise and chagrin when a few weeks later, I received that outfit as a gift for my birthday! I had not been hinting, but it was too far to take it back to Myrtle Beach so I kept it! I told the residents during the devotional at Wesley Commons that when I wore that outfit out to dinner or out shopping, I was treated better. When

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shopping, clerks would come from nowhere to wait on me! My comment was how much value we place on expensive clothes in our society. One very wise woman commented, “Carol, maybe it was because you carried yourself better. You had a little bit more confidence because you were wearing such fine clothing.” How many of us carry ourselves with confidence because we have the material blessings of life?

Jesus was talking to those who were confident in their riches. They thought that God blessed those who obeyed Him with material rewards, and then the continuation of their thinking was that God condemned to poverty those who did not obey Him! So that thinking allowed them to enjoy their riches and walk past those in need around them. Who were they to interfere with God’s punishment on someone? It was the poor person’s responsibility to turn their life around. The rich neglected those parts of the Old Testament such as Deuteronomy 15:11, which said, “Open your hand to the poor and needy in your land,” or the Proverb 14:31 that says, “Those who oppress the poor insults their maker, but those who are kind to the needy honor Him.” The Old Testament prophets in many places warn the people about indulging in their rich lives while neglecting the poor in their midst, while overlooking the poor at their gate. In this life, the rich man had more than enough. He had more than enough resources to care for Lazarus, but he ignored him, and we know that he saw him because he knew his name.

Well, then the day came when they both died. The rich man is buried, and he probably had a fancy funeral and a lot of people gathered to mourn his death. Lazarus’ body was probably thrown in the city dump outside the city gate, which was the custom for beggars in that day. Lazarus was still outside the gates. At the moment of death, what had been happening on the inside of each man, where they had been spiritually is finally revealed. What happens next is not because one was rich and one was poor. What happens next was because of their personal relationships with God. Lazarus goes directly to the bosom of Abraham. Lazarus goes to Heaven. The rich man goes to the other side of a great chasm, and he is in torment. He is in pain. Part of his torment is that he can see what it is like on the other side of that chasm, and there is Lazarus, the one that he had neglected to care for. The rich man still had some arrogance about him even in death. He asked Abraham to send Lazarus to him to kiss the tip of his finger and water and cool his tongue. The rich man assumes that he can still summon servants. That is part of his sin.

Abraham reminded the rich man that he had the good things in his lifetime, and he had chosen not to care for Lazarus then, and now Lazarus could not minister to him. However, the rich man does express concern for his brothers. He asked Father Abraham to send someone back to warn them that their choices in this life have consequences in the next life. Abraham responded, “They already have Moses and the prophets. They have been warned.” The rich man’s concern for his brothers may have just been self-justification as if he is saying, you know, if I had just had more life, I would have acted differently!

The story makes it clear. He had enough life yet he missed the obvious truths.

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In the many different roles that I have had so far in this life, as a teacher, as a mother, as a youth minister, as a pastor, and now as a chaplain, there have been times when I have been frustrated because I have taught God's truths, I have preached my heart out, I have shared God's wisdom with people, and I can tell just by looking at them that it's all falling on deaf ears. They're not hearing what is being said, and their attitude seems to be, oh, she doesn't know what she's talking about or she's just being old-fashioned. I can recognize that kind of attitude because I have been guilty of the same kind of attitude sometimes myself. I have been told the truth only to think well that doesn't apply to me or that's not true in today's world. Only to be stubborn oft is a hard way that God's truth is still God's truth.

At the beginning of this parable, there was a gate, and the gate represents a connection. There was a connection between the rich man and Lazarus, but the rich man does not pass through the gate to help Lazarus, and when events are changed, he, in arrogance, still wants Lazarus to come and help him.

Albert Schweitzer was converted by this parable. He believed that Africa was the poor beggar at the door of Europe, and he left the academic world of Europe with its Ph Ds, and he went to care for his poor brothers and sisters at the gate in Lambarene.

There are gates or doors to our neighbors that God has opened and expects us to pass through, where he expects us to go and minister in the name of Jesus. Where are those gates in your life? Is there someone who needs your care in your neighborhood, where you work? We know that there are many in need here in Greenwood. There are many in need in South Carolina. How about the people outside the gates of our country? What a tremendous theological lesson we had at the end of the children's sermon last week when Steve Skinner gave the children a dollar, and then he asked them to give their dollars to someone else, but before he said to give them to someone you don't know, one of the children said to the other, "I'll give you mine, and you give me yours." Is that not what we do? We give to one another even within our own churches. How much of our mission is just to ourselves? Rather than going out the gate, going to those that we do not know, to those that are in desperate need around us?

There's been a move among Christians in some churches. I thought about this as I was preparing this sermon. When I went to Bi-Lo, and I saw that they're already starting to give out their tokens for turkeys at Thanksgiving, and I thought Thanksgiving is coming, and that means that Christmas is right behind the door, and I need to start my Christmas shopping. There are a lot of churches, a lot of Christians that are approaching Christmas in a different way. They are spending as much or more money on missions and mission work as they are on their family or their loved ones. Instead of just sharing the dollars within their group, they are reaching out to others with their giving, and that is the main part of their giving, and that is what Christmas should be as we celebrate God's gifts to us.

This day, this parable warns us that the day will come when the gates in our lives will become a chasm that cannot be bridged. How can we be sure that like Lazarus we are on the good side of that chasm and that we are resting in the bosom of Abraham? I have to

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admit that this parable makes me a little uncomfortable. I dare say that we are all very materially rich, but are we spiritually rich? How much confidence can we place in our homes and our clothes and our positions and our degrees? Paul warned Timothy that those who want to be rich fall into temptation and they are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires. Those desires plunge people into ruin and destruction. The love of money, not money, because money is just a tool, but the love of money that is the root of all kinds of evil. In their eagerness to be rich, Paul wrote, some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains. Instead of pursuing all of the newest toys that our society is trying to sell us, we are to pursue righteousness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness. Instead of striving to get ahead to have a larger home or a better job or the latest recreational vehicle, we are to seek godliness with contentment.

This parable should make us struggle with what we are doing with all that God has entrusted to us. Not one material thing followed the rich man at his death. He found in the afterlife what he had in this life! No love! No compassion! A lot of arrogance! Although Abraham told the rich man that his brothers would not be convinced even if one came back from the dead, someone had risen from the dead, the one who told this parable. Jesus knew His faith. He knew that there would be those that would not repent, who would not believe even though they had been told the truth, and Jesus said I am the door. Jesus is our gate. He is the gate that we come to pass from this life into the next life. Those who miss the gate may, like the rich man, find themselves crying in vain for a drop of cool water. The rich man placed his confidence in a life that was temporary, a life that was based on fine clothes and sumptuous meals and the other material, tangible things of life. He was one that had been trapped by the temptations that lead to destruction.

Churches as well as individuals can be guilty of buying things and building things and putting their trust in those things and not concerned with the beggar outside their doors. Lazarus, it can be ascertained from this passage, in spite of his life, had contentment about his life because he had taken hold of a different life, a life that is truly life, eternal life.

I began my sermon by telling you about my friend, who has no regrets. He is an ex-inmate, who has totally and completely turned his life around. He's been out of prison nearly 20 years, and he works a secular job, and he witnesses while not on that job whenever he gets a chance, and he is also in ministry. He goes to the gates of many of the prisons here in South Carolina to preach to the inmates, to warn the inmates. They are all his brothers and sisters. He goes to the Greenwood County jail to warn the inmates and to give them the opportunity to change, to turn their lives around, and to encourage those that have turned their lives around. He's trying to start a church for those who do not feel welcome going to the doors of many of our churches. His life is not easy. He has faced many difficulties, but God is his helper. He has no regrets that he has turned his life around, that he has put his faith and trust in Jesus Christ.

Reflect on your life and your ministry, and can you say with him, I have no regrets? Amen.