

Sermon Preached by Jennifer Rose
September 25, 2016
"The Great Divide"

Dear friends in Christ Jesus: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord & Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Bill Gates. Mark Zuckerberg. Warren Buffett. What do these 3 people have in common? They are within the top 10 wealthiest people in the world - each of them with net worths of over 50 billion dollars. For perspective - these people all are worth more than 50 billion. But for just a little perspective, the height of a measly one billion dollars in 1 dollar bills would be more than 67 miles tall. You could buy the Chicago Cubs - the team - for 1 billion. You could buy two of the most expensive house in the world. You could buy ten g650 jets. Or 179 million pounds of Jelly belly jellybeans - you could swim in them! You could buy 20,000 military tanks. Or 71 Billion plastic sporks! Now multiply all of those things by 50 and you get an idea of the wealth these people have. Yowzers. They are in an entirely different life situation than any of us in this room.

So today when Jesus starts talking about the haves and the have-nots, we can really understand that. Luke's gospel is filled with stories about the needs of the poor and oppressed and about the excesses of the rich. Of the whole Gospel of Luke though, this parable of Lazarus and the rich man makes this distinction between poor and rich stand out the most - so vastly different in life experience that there is a huge chasm - a huge divide between them.

The Pharisees, who are the target audience for this parable, have endured Jesus' teachings about money for awhile. Described by Luke as people who loved money, the Pharisees begin to mock and ridicule Jesus because he claims that one cannot serve God and wealth. Finally, Jesus resorts to telling a story. Where lessons and rhetoric often fail, simple stories with imaginative characters and dramatic plots often succeed.

This rich man was filthy rich. He is often named "Dives" (DYE-veeze) because *dives* is the Latin word for rich. Dives dressed, for example, only in the best. "Purple and fine linen." Today this would be Armani. Valentino. Ralph Lauren. The names celebrities say when asked, "Who are you wearing?" He dressed the part. He ate everyday like it was Christmas or Thanksgiving. With the best cooks in the land at his service, no doubt, he never ate leftovers, even though he had them. Some might say that Dives "had it all," but that would be wrong. That, in fact, was his problem: he felt he didn't have it all. Once he had some, he realized there was always more, and so his life was built on this vicious circle of acquiring and acquiring...there was, in his view, always more to be had. Clothes, food, influence, Facebook friends...Dives could always use more.

Meanwhile, right out at the entrance to his neighborhood, where he'd practically have to trip over him each day, lay a beggar named Lazarus. If Dives was filthy rich, Lazarus was filthy poor...and I mean filthy. Not only did he have no food or money, but he was stricken with some awful skin disease and had no

access to adequate health care, unless you count the dogs who would come and lick his open sores. He would have loved to eat those leftovers from Dives' five refrigerators, but—alas!—Lazarus was invisible. No one really paid him attention as he sat there in utter anguish. Two people, living together in the same world—sharing the same property, even—but having completely different experiences with life. One is successful, living the high life, and the other is a low-life. Then they both die.

As Jesus tells the story, Lazarus doesn't even get the luxury of a burial. Nevertheless, angels swoop down to carry him away and lay him comfortably in the bosom of Abraham, where most people would hope to spend eternity in that day and age. Dives gets a burial, but then finds himself in Hades where he gets tormented forever. Ever the opportunist, Dives looks up and says to Abraham (even in death choosing not to address the poor man directly), "Hey, Abe, this place stinks. Why don't you send ole Lazy-boy to get me something to drink?" Abraham informs him of the rules: there is a huge, unbridgeable gap between where Lazarus is and where Dives is in Hades and that's that. No crossing. For any reason. Kind of like the short distance between the mansion and the gate which Dives chose never to cross in his life on earth, right? Abraham goes on to inform him of the reversal of fortune that Jesus has been mentioning throughout his ministry: the hungry are filled with good things and the rich are sent away empty.

But that doesn't stop Dives. He continues to bargain with Abraham, maybe for the first time thinking of someone other than himself. His brothers! Maybe if Lazarus were to go to them from the dead—again, he refuses to dignify Lazarus with a direct request—then his brothers would be warned against being so greedy. And that's where Abraham reminds Dives of what Jesus has been saying the whole time: this business of taking care of the poor and sharing wealthy with others is not a new concept. It has been a central message of God's word through the prophets since the beginning of Israel's history. Abraham's final message to the rich man: even if someone were to rise from the dead, people will still be drawn to money and wealth and power more than they will be drawn to God's Word. Even if someone *were* to rise from the dead, people will still be tempted to avert their eyes and their generosity from the Lazaruses who lie in their path.

Last week I was driving in Fargo, pulling out of a parking lot - and noticed someone. There, beside me, on the median, sat what looked to be a homeless man holding up a sign asking for help. He looked dirty and unshaven, some words on his sign were misspelled, and he seemed to be nodding off to sleep, even though it was about lunchtime. I thought to myself, I could give him something now, but all I have is a little cash and he might not use it wisely.

As I pondered what his life might be like, I wondered at my own awkwardness at being so close to him. Why my mistrust? Why my shame? Why my judgment? I'm sure it had something to do with sin, but before I could rationalize anything, a car turning into the parking lot just on the other side of him stopped, bringing all traffic behind it to a halt. Down rolled a window and out popped the hand of a driver bearing a fast food bag. He called the homeless man over and handed him what I supposed was a hot meal. At that point the light turned green and I had to drive on, but not before I thanked the driver of the car (in my head, of course) for reminding me, yet again, that someone has risen from the dead.

It's very easy, even in this country, to think that if someone is poor it somehow their own fault and the resources are there for them to remove themselves from their condition. It's the stereotypical and unhelpful thought pattern that "God helps those who help themselves." (Which, by the way, is not in the Bible and is not a biblical attitude.) And this attitude exists not only in our time. Just as disparities of wealth have always existed, so have possible theories for those disparities, no matter how incorrect they may be. In Jesus' day it was very common to think that if you were poor it was because God had punished you somehow, and that if you were rich, it was because you had done right and God had blessed you.

Yet before we turn these parables of Lazarus and Dives strictly into a lesson on social justice, a lesson on the economics of God's kingdom, we must remember that Jesus tells this parable primarily to the Pharisees, who are lovers of money. It is Jesus' sternest warning against the dangers of trying to serve two masters. The desire to have more and more quarantine us from the ability to help others and bring them joy in this life. We do not open our hearts and our gates and our car windows because we earn points with God that way, or because we want to earn a great place in heaven. We open our hearts and our gates and our car windows and give of our wealth—whatever that may be—because that's how the world looks now that Jesus is risen Lord.

Maybe the world has always been a tale of the imbalance between the rich and the poor. And yet... people of faith don't have to fall into the trap of thinking that "this is just the way the world works out," because we know it isn't true. It never was, which is what Moses and the prophets were trying to make clear. But it's especially not true anymore. Jesus has triumphed over all the powers of greed and selfishness, showing us that opening our lives to the Spirit of God makes us truly richer than any amount of money. The story of Lazarus and the rich man isn't about the ultimate fate of the poor or the rich. If we get stuck on that aspect of the parable we are liable to miss the point. The point has more to do with the world that Jesus' ministry has come to create, a world where the rich and poor are transformed by the gospel and realize their interconnectedness and rejoice in their responsibilities to each other. In the end, the great divide isn't really a divide at all - the cross is a bridge that transforms us all.

This is why the gospel is good for both poor as well as the rich...because under Jesus' reign even the money-lovers will learn what Lazarus and the rest of the poor already know: that God is our only help. In the end it will not be money, or fame, or a good education, or the right upbringing, or computer ingenuity that gives us the life that really is life. God *alone* is where we'll find our hope, and for his vision of a world restored in Jesus we work and pray.

And that, as it turns out, happens to be the meaning of Lazarus' name. The name Dives might mean "rich man," but Lazarus, in fact, means, "God is my help" in the language of Jesus' time. It is an ironic play on words that would not have been lost on the Pharisee audience. Isn't that a clever piece to the story? The poor man's name actually means "God helps me."

As we look out in despair and confusion at the disparities in our world, and as we ponder our own place in it, may we not simply see Lazarus, but perhaps *be* him, too. In the wondrous light of the resurrection, may the risen Lord Jesus name us “Lazarus”: *God* is our help.

Thanks be to God. Amen.