

Psalm 146

Praise the Lord!

Let my whole being^[a] praise the Lord!

² I will praise the Lord with all my life;

I will sing praises to my God as long as I live.

³ Don't trust leaders;

don't trust any human beings—

there's no saving help with them!

⁴ Their breath leaves them,

then they go back to the ground.

On that very same day, their plans die too.

⁵ The person whose help is the God of Jacob—

the person whose hope rests on the Lord their God—

is truly happy!

⁶ God: the maker of heaven and earth,

the sea, and all that is in them,

God: who is faithful forever,

⁷ who gives justice to people who are oppressed,

who gives bread to people who are starving!

The Lord: who frees prisoners.

⁸ The Lord: who makes the blind see.

The Lord: who straightens up those who are bent low.

The Lord: who loves the righteous.

⁹ The Lord: who protects immigrants,

who helps orphans and widows,

but who makes the way of the wicked twist and turn!

¹⁰ The Lord will rule forever!

Zion, your God will rule from one generation to the next!

Praise the Lord!

Luke 16:19-31

¹⁹ "There was a certain rich man who clothed himself in purple and fine linen, and who feasted luxuriously every day. ²⁰ At his gate lay a certain poor man named Lazarus who was covered with sores. ²¹ Lazarus longed to eat the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table. Instead, dogs would come and lick his sores.

²² "The poor man died and was carried by angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³ While being tormented in the place of the dead, he looked up and saw Abraham at a distance with Lazarus at his side. ²⁴ He shouted, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me. Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I'm suffering in this flame.' ²⁵ But Abraham said, '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. ²⁶ Moreover, a great crevasse has been fixed between us and you. Those who wish to cross over from here to you cannot. Neither can anyone cross from there to us.'

²⁷ "The rich man said, 'Then I beg you, Father, send Lazarus to my father's house. ²⁸ I have five brothers. He needs to warn them so that they don't come to this place of agony.' ²⁹ Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets. They must listen to

them.' ³⁰ The rich man said, 'No, Father Abraham! But if someone from the dead goes to them, they will change their hearts and lives.' ³¹ Abraham said, 'If they don't listen to Moses and the Prophets, then neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead.'"

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit: Amen.

Who is Lazarus? Not in this story, necessarily, but Lazarus alive? Lazarus in our world, suffering at the gates? The one, or more likely, ones, whom we pass by daily, leaving to suffer on their own? You know the one: the one who finds more compassion in the dogs licking his sores than in his fellow human beings. The one, or ones, constantly ignored, consistently silenced, currently told that their lives don't matter?

On Monday, I spent the day back at my old stomping grounds at Duke Divinity School for a conference on preaching that honored the retirement of my advisor, Richard Lischer. One of the speakers shared that the preacher's job is to be curious about God themselves, to help the congregation be curious about God, and to help

people see that God is curious about them. I kind of love that. My job is to be curious and to help y'all be curious about God, and to show you that God's curious about you too. That's pretty excellent. Of course, that curiosity is made a bit more ominous when Jesus says things like, if I may paraphrase "even if someone rises from the dead, will that change anything for you?"

This parable absolutely jumbles our definitions of fairness, of equality. Some people think fairness is all about equal opportunity. My grandmother was this way. I remember how painstakingly clear she was that she spent the same amount of money on each grandchild every holiday. If my "big" presents were less expensive than my cousins, even if I didn't care at all, Grandma would pack my stocking with an odd currency of gum, hot wheels, and drumsticks until all was level in her mind. That definition of equality pervades the American water, the idea that

equality means an equal amount of resource or affirmation or attention. But Jesus tells us here that God's equality is not our equality.

To understand that, perhaps it might help for us to embody the parable ourselves from the different perspectives, beginning with **Lazarus**. When we start with Lazarus, we see that the focus isn't necessarily upon who's destined for hell, or poverty, or damnation, but rather that God's interested in freeing people who've been oppressed, including perhaps especially those who we marginalized with our action or our inaction. God's intent on blessing people who've never experienced blessing before. As Jesus says elsewhere, it's not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. Think about that a minute. Equal healthcare doesn't mean giving everybody medicine or everyone surgery, but giving it to those who need it, and in our society, giving access to those who otherwise can't afford it.

Jesus's commitment to Lazarus is a commitment to the sick, to those plagued by the ills of a culture that forgets them, to those made invisible by a vile virus that blinds our eyes to the needs of those around us.

To me, this sounds like God's affirmative action plan. Simply stated, affirmative action is positive discrimination, especially within university admission and scholarship awards, to provide opportunities to female and minority students who've not had the same privilege as white, male students. I'll admit that this used to make me uncomfortable, that it didn't sound like equality to me, but again, what Jesus tells us here is that God's equality isn't our equality. God's not offering us an equal chance. God's making certain that everyone gets blessed.

It's natural, then to wonder how that made the **Rich Man** feel? The text tells us that he wants the same benefits that Lazarus received, and Abraham's response? The Rich

Man received blessings already and refused to share those blessings with Lazarus or others. Lazarus is receiving from God what he never received from the Rich Man, and now the Rich Man must share in Lazarus's poverty because he ignored the constant teachings from Moses and the Prophets about carrying the burdens of others, about caring for the sick, the widows, the orphans, the refugees, any in need, all who won't be blessed in this life unless we work to bless them. Why else would God bless us so?

One of my favorite bands, Fall Out Boy, has a hook that I've loved for a long time, but on the way back from Duke on Monday night, I heard it as I was thinking about this sermon, and it blew my mind. "I've read about the afterlife but I've never really lived." That sounds a whole like to me like Jesus: the Rich man heard Moses and the prophets, and but he surely hasn't listened. Why would someone rising from the dead make any difference? He's read about the

afterlife, but he's never really lived in to it. For the Rich Man, it's a myth for which he's not willing to change his current lifestyle.

In a parable full of strange things, one stranger thing stands out to me. Abraham, in his conversation with the Rich Man, Abraham says, "Moreover, a great crevasse has been fixed between us and you. Those who wish to cross over from here to you cannot. Neither can anyone cross from there to us." At first, this seems like a simple commentary on the nature of heaven and hell. There's an un-crossable distance between the two. Yet, that's not Father Abraham's language. He says that the chasm has been fixed between not two places, but between the people. Who, I wonder, constructed that chasm?

It seems to me that the Rich Man spent his entire life pretending that a crevasse existed between him and Lazarus. Lazarus lived at the Rich Man's gate, suffering

hunger and sickness while the Rich Man passed him by daily to feast at home. The Rich Man's behavior created a chasm between him and Lazarus in life, and when the promise of God – to bind up the brokenhearted, to heal the sick, to include the outcast – when those things come to be, the Rich Man carries the chasm with him into the grave. The Rich Man isn't with Father Abraham because he can't imagine being equals with Lazarus, not really, not in a way that made him change his behavior.

How much does that describe our lives? We're determined too much that there's something necessary that divides us from them, whoever the them is and whoever the us happen to be. Whether virtue or good fortune or simply the accidents of life, we just act as though a great crevasse exists between, and we fool ourselves into believing that God's generally alright with that separation. Nothing could be further from the Gospel. God's curious about us, about

our whole world, and in particular, curious about ways that allow us all to have life abundant. God's got a vested interest in leveling the mountains, in making space for all to thrive. But if we choose to separate ourselves from those people Jesus has told us will be a part of the Kingdom of God, that are explicitly blessed – the poor and poor in Spirit, the hungry and those who hunger for righteousness, those who weep and those who show mercy, the sick and outcast and destitute – if we choose to separate ourselves from these shoe-ins to the Kingdom of God, then we separate ourselves from the Kingdom of God.

The parable ends on a seemingly hopeless note. Even if someone rose from the dead, Abraham wonders whether anyone rising from the dead could change their hearts, their behaviors. For some, even the miraculous is meaningless. The world has made them callous to God's intervention, so that even the most profound truths may be treated as a lie.

If they can't see God among the living like Lazarus, why would they look beyond the grave for God's work? What difference would the resurrection of Lazarus make if we refuse to admit his humanity, his dignity, his personhood, his equality. Even in death, all the Rich Man wants from Lazarus is his servanthood, making him bring him water or carry a message to his family. The Rich Man doesn't want to be with Lazarus, so Lazarus's resurrection won't make a difference.

With that in mind, my initial question still remains. Who is Lazarus today? African Americans and other people of color? Undoubtedly. Refugees? Most certainly. People with disabilities? Absolutely. We've gotten really good as a society at living like the Rich Man, leaving people to suffer at the gates. After watching seemingly the entire internet smear the life of Terence Crutcher this week, trying for some reason to justify why an unarmed black man with his hands up should be served a death sentence in the streets, we

should know that we, like the Rich Man, are creating chasms between us and those most vulnerable in society. Even the dogs have more compassion than we do.

But Jesus wants to be with them, and Jesus wants to be with us, and Jesus's resurrection has the power to collapse all the chasms we've created between them and us. That's not to say that the Rich Man's denial of Lazarus or our actions today don't matter; they do. It means that there's one who can and does cross crevasse that separated the Rich man from Lazarus, who bridges the chasm between us and those most vulnerable in our society, who crosses the threshold from the dead to the living, and reminds us of what Moses and the prophets always told us: God's not about simple equality, but about blessing those who haven't been blessed. Jesus positively discriminates and chooses the last, the lost, the least of these in our societies because God wants all people to be blessed. Even when

we're determined to fix a crevasse between us and them,
to build walls to keep out the people that aren't like us,
Jesus breaks the boundary of death, Jesus crosses the
tomb's boundary, doing the one thing that seems
impossible for the Rich Man, that seems impossible also for
us: honoring the dignity of Lazarus and those like him,
admitting that the most important thing isn't Lazarus's illness
or poverty or skin color or sexual orientation or gender
identity or religious background or political status, but his
humanity, that he like every other human being was
created by God, in God's image.. In his resurrection, Jesus
does what the Rich Man could never seem to do: Love
Lazarus. Maybe, just maybe, Jesus is calling us to follow him
across the chasms we've created to and learn to love the
Lazarus's in our lives. The Good News for us that just wasn't
available to the Rich Man in this parable? The resurrection
of Jesus has the power to make a difference. Amen.