

September 29, 2019  
St. John's, Hopewell, VA  
16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
A sermon by the Rt. Rev. James B. Magness

In 2006 I was living and working in Louisville, Kentucky. A few miles south of Louisville is the town of Bardstown. Though probably Bardstown is best known for its production of bourbon, it is also the home of a large Roman Catholic Trappist monastery by the name of Gethsemane Abbey. Not only was this the abbey where the well known Trappist monk Thomas Merton lived, also at the time I lived there it was where my spiritual director lived.

I was a candidate for a significant position in another diocese and on several occasions as I met with Sister Martha for direction I brought it up. Sister Martha, a wise and unpretentious person, hadn't missed the fact that during one of our sessions I had become, should we say, overwhelmed with the greatness of my qualifications for this new position. In retrospect, I think Sister Martha probably perceived that I was convinced that I should be the overwhelming choice amongst the other candidates for the position. At the conclusion of our session that day she told me that on the cold winter day that it was, she wanted me to bundle up and spend a couple of hours walking through the monastic cemetery on the grounds of Gethsemane Abbey. I should emphasize that Sister Martha did not give me the benefit of telling me why she directed me to walk through the cemetery. That was just the way she was.

Putting on my heavy coat, cap, and gloves I went outside and climbed to the top of a hill where the cemetery was located. The first thing that I noticed was that each grave was marked with an identical marker: a simple white metal cross about two feet high. Each cross had an inscribed plate with the name of the person, the monastic connection – such as sister or priest – and birth and death dates. In the two hours I was there I read almost every marker in the cemetery. While some were the graves of archbishops and abbots, also there were the graves of men and women who were novices of the Trappist order. A novice is a person who has not yet taken life vows and is exploring whether or not he or she has a life calling to be a monastic person living the life of a Trappist monk.

After spending my two hours there, I got back in my car to make the forty-five minute drive back to Louisville. At first I was – befuddled. I couldn't figure out why Sister Martha had told me to spend those two hours in the cemetery. Just before I had arrived at my home I was struck by the purpose. Sister Martha wanted me to know that death is the great leveler. Those who may have been consumed by their greatness are brought down to a position of equality with those who had lived humble lives of service to God's people. Whether you were a woman who was a novice or a man who had served as an archbishop, in death there is absolute equality. In the great reversal of death the life of the humble servant who was a novice would be as honored as the archbishop.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 14:7, NRSV.

In fact, in the context of scripture there is ample reason to believe that those of humble service are those who are honored by God. In Luke's Gospel Jesus offers significant advice for those who would hear. Be sure that you take only the VIP seats at feasts when invited to come up higher. When you give a lavish feast and are tempted to only invite the elite friends and family, you should invite the poor, dis-eased, and those who have been marginalized by their social system.<sup>2</sup> Persons of wealth should consider selling all their possessions and then redistributing their money to the poor.<sup>3</sup>

This story of the rich man and Lazarus seems to be the culmination of all Jesus' teaching to those who could not seem to hear and grasp what Jesus had taught before. It is if Jesus is thinking that if I ever get them to listen to me I am going to have to hit them with a strong and even possibly outlandish story. Jesus was intent on doing what he needed to do to get their attention.

Eventually both the rich man and Lazarus die, as all do, regardless of social position.<sup>4</sup> Our social status and poverty/wealth do not accompany us. And yes, this is Jesus' most impactful and definitive story about the great reversal. Recently a friend told me that this story of Lazarus and the rich man illustrates what her grandmother always told her: What goes around, comes around.

Also the story emphasizes what we heard in the epistle reading today from I Timothy. Hear again: "...for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it..."<sup>5</sup> To put a fine point on his teaching, the writer also wrote, "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains."<sup>6</sup>

I believe that Jesus' hope was that his parable story would be a great awakening to any who would have heard him. Jesus questions the ease with which we can turn away from those whose needs are beyond their own capabilities and resources. Not only are we called to care for the needs of others, there are consequences of not seeing the needs of others.

At the beginning of Luke's Gospel is the story of Mary, the mother of Jesus. We have Mary's song in which she introduces the reader to the idea that God has "...scattered the proud in the imaginations of their hearts, put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree."<sup>7</sup>

Not only is the story of Lazarus and the rich man the reversal of fortunes, for most people in our world it would be seen as absolute good news! In a dramatic fashion, the

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 14:21-24, [NRSV](#).

<sup>3</sup> Luke 18:21-25, [NRSV](#).

<sup>4</sup> Luke 16:22, [NRSV](#).

<sup>5</sup> 1 Timothy 6:6, [NRSV](#).

<sup>6</sup> 1 Timothy 6:10, [NRSV](#).

<sup>7</sup> Luke 1:51, [NRSV](#).

parable reaffirms that though in our world the rich usually are powerful and honored in the next life it may indeed be the poor in this life who will be honored. It is obvious through even the cursory reading of the New Testament underscores that for Jesus it was the oppressed, outsiders, and the poor were men and women who got his attention.

So, who gets your attention? How well do your life priorities line up with this hard hitting story? Who or what gets your attention?

Every now and then stories are circulated about what people in the latter years of life regret about doing or not doing during their lives. It may or may not surprise you to know that in most of the lists no one ever regrets not bungee-jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge or missing a supposed important business meeting.

The most recent one of these lists was compiled by a nurse who specialized in caring for terminally ill persons. In her list the number one regret was that people wished they had possessed the courage to be themselves and second to have cared more for the people around them.<sup>8</sup>

The poor man Lazarus was lying at the gate. Lazarus was severely ill and covered with sores. The rich man, a man with no name, in order to get into or out of his home stepped around or over him each day. The chances were missed to care for the person who was, by the way, a child of God's creation. As we will say during the renewal of the baptismal covenant in a few minutes, this is what it means to care for the dignity of all human beings.

That brings me to what we are about to do: baptize and through the rite of Confirmation publicly renew the baptismal vows of several members of St. John's. If you are to be baptized or you are going to renew your baptism vows through confirmation this morning, would you please stand.

Candidates, I want to be clear with you. I am fully aware that, me included, none of us are perfect. Inevitably most of us will come to the end of our lives and realize that there were things done and left undone; things we should not have done and things we should have done. We'll have regrets.

Yet, this event today of the renewal of our commitment to Jesus as our Lord is a time to reorient our lives; to live in the secure love of God knowing that we can trust God enough to actually be ourselves and to care for those Lazarus-like persons who have been placed in our lives.

I hope you have been impressed by the story about Lazarus and the rich man. In fact, I pray that you will be troubled enough to have eyes to see the people, people right in front of you, whom God is calling you to love.

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<sup>8</sup> "Important Things At The End Of Life," Interview with Nurse Bonnie Ware, [The Guardian](#): February 1, 2012.

AMEN.