

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons
“So Far, and Yet So Close”
Luke 16: 19-31
19th Sunday after Pentecost
September 25, 2016**



This Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus fits into the literary category of apocalyptic literature. You will remember from our summer series on Revelation that this literary form employs exaggerated imagery to the end that it serves as a wake-up call, pulling back a curtain to reveal to readers something which they need to see before it is too late. (1)

The questions to keep in mind as the parable is read are these, “What does Luke intend to reveal to his readers? What is the Spirit revealing to us?”



You’ve heard the story.

Now I direct your attention to the painting which you find on the front of your bulletin (on the screen)?

It was painted by an anonymous artist around the year 1610 and is not exactly contemporary, is it?

Mentally take a step back from the painting and take in the details.

What do you see?

What immediately stood out for me, and perhaps it does for you, is the sumptuousness of the food. A side of choice beef. Poultry dripping sizzling grease as it is removed from its spit. Freshly caught fish ready to be filleted and grilled. Fruit, vegetables, bread, cake. A multi-course repast to be added to the already groaning table of the privileged coterie portrayed in the upper right hand corner of the painting.

Do you see Lazarus?

He is hard to find. You really have to look for Lazarus in the painting. The painting is so full of kitchen riches that Lazarus is hard to see at all. And what is ironically shocking once you do see him is how close he is to the rich man's table. He is literally right there, not a full step away.

The painting portrays the first half of the story: during his life the person of privilege did not even see the marginalized person who was a mere step away.

The second half of the story portrays what happens in the afterlife. The person of privilege now sees Lazarus, but it is too late. The parable portrays a permanent chasm which is fixed between the privileged man and poor Lazarus, with no way to cross over the chasm.

Let's return now to the question which I asked prior to reading the Scripture lesson. What does Luke intend to convey to his readers in placing this story in his gospel? More specifically, where does Luke intend for the audience to place itself in the parable?

You may have a different opinion, but it seems to me that we readers are being situated not so much in the role of either poor marginalized Lazarus or the privileged man, but rather in the role of the five siblings who are still alive. We are being told that we do still have time—not much time, but a little bit of time—to see one another as brothers and sisters, every one of us granted a privileged place at God's table, and to live our lives accordingly, before the chasm becomes permanent. We have been given Moses and the prophets. We have been given the Scriptures which tell us that God's economy is one where no one is marginalized. We have even been given Jesus who has risen from the dead to demonstrate to us that it is not yet too late to bridge the gap and become the one beloved community which God has created us to be.

We read this parable this week in the midst of a painful week for those of us who call the metropolitan area of Charlotte, North Carolina, "home" as our tee shirts say. One might call this an apocalyptic week for us, a week when the curtain has been pulled back on the chasm of racism that exists in our community, a week when we have received an urgent wake-up call to look with honesty at how the sin of racism has us in its grip.

It can be a scary thing to look at the sin that is within us, but we who are the church of Jesus Christ have a bit of practice at this. We Christians of the Reformed tradition, Calvinist Christians, Presbyterians are particularly lucky, because our tradition has never shied away from honesty about human sinfulness. Every Sunday we come to church. We confess our sin. We offer it up to God. We receive God's forgiveness. We share the peace of Christ with one another, a sign not of mere hospitality, but a sign of hope that God really does have the power to free from every sin...our sin of racism, our penchant for violence, our unwillingness to grant each other places at our particular tables...and then to send us out into the world to live a different way.

This past week, J.D. Vance, the author of the book *Hillbilly Elegy*, wrote an op-ed piece in the *New York Times*, in which he addressed the current situation in this country.

In the article, he wrote of President Obama's 2008 speech on race. In that speech, President Obama spoke personally of his white grandmother and how though she loved him more than anything, he can also recall hearing her utter racial and ethnic epithets which made him cringe.

Vance continues, “There are many ways to confront the people of that nation in all its complexity. We can ignore that these biases exist, and pretend that our uniquely diverse society need never address the difficult questions posed by that diversity. This is the path chosen by far too many of my fellow conservatives.

We can deem a significant chunk of our populace unrepentant bigots, which appears to be the strategy of Mrs. Clinton and much of the left.

Or we can recognize that most of us fall into another basket altogether: One where prejudice — even implicit — coexists with incredible compassion and decency. In that basket is the black preacher who may view homosexuality as a little icky even as he lovingly ministers to struggling gay members of his church. The adoptive parent of a child born in Asia, who pours her heart and soul into her child’s well-being even as she tells a pollster that she doesn’t much care about America’s experience with Japanese internment. And in that basket is a white grandmother who speaks ill of black people even as she gives her beloved African-American grandson the emotional support and love that enable him to become the president of all Americans.” (2)

We are brothers and sisters. We are brothers and sisters in our complex humanity, brothers and sisters called to confess our complicity in sinful systems, brothers and sisters in our hope and faith that God can not only forgive our sinfulness but use our shortcomings to pave a highway to a more just nation and world.

1. Barbara Rossing, “Commentary on Luke 16: 19-31,” www.workingpreacher.org, September 25, 2016.
2. J.D. Vance, “When Good People Say Bad Things,” *The New York Times*, September 22, 2016.

Videos used during the 9:45 service:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jdiegEULdD0>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3JAx99g9P74>