

Sermon

6 October 2013

West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood

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Text: Luke 16:19-31

We are very good at building walls, erecting fences, locking doors, shutting gates. Especially where I come from. In South Africa everyone has huge walls around their houses, electrified fencing, electronic gates. That is how we try to keep ourselves safe – by fencing out the rest of the world.

Although the purpose of the fences and the gates are really to keep the criminals out, without realising it, we use these fences to keep everyone else out too...

Because you don't have to open your locked door when the doorbell rings – who's going to know that you're in? And you don't have to acknowledge the people standing outside your gates, because if you don't want to see them, you can just pretend that they're not there.

The scary thing is, that once we get used to this way of life, we start doing the same thing on an emotional level too. We fence ourselves off from the people around us, we lock ourselves up.

But that is not a very clever thing to do, as we just saw in our reading.

There was this rich man, who lived in luxury. He was dressed in purple and fine linen, which is a clear indication of his position in society – he was very important, could even have been royalty.

Outside his gate, in other words – right under his nose, but still *out* of his life - lived a beggar, named Lazarus. He was covered with sores, which would make him ritually unclean; he longed to eat what fell from the rich man's table, which meant that he must have been close to starving; and even the dogs came and licked his sores, which made him doubly unclean, since pious Jews regarded dogs as unclean animals too.

And here I just want to pause for a minute. Because if you read this parable with our 2013 frame of mind, you'll probably think that it's a story about rich and poor. And you'll probably also think "shame on you rich man!" for ignoring an unhealthy, starving beggar at your door, "how can you sleep at night?!"

But actually, according to the rules of society way back then, the rich man did *nothing* wrong and *Lazarus* was at fault – believe it or not!!

Because ritually unclean people had to be avoided at all costs, because contact with them would make you unclean too, and thus not welcome in the house of God.

And beggars had certain rules to adhere to, too. To just lie in front of someone's gate and hope for food was not good enough. In exchange for food and care, they had to do certain things for the people who took care of them, like talking about their good qualities and helping them with small jobs.

This was called the patron-client system. That was how the poor were taken care of, and if everybody played by the rules, it was an effective solution for a huge problem. Well, most of the time...

But through this story Jesus wants to teach us that God does not allow himself to be restricted by the rules of society. Not back then and not now. Every single person is important to God. Even the outcasts of society, those people we don't want to mix with because we think that no good can come from it.

And we see this in the story even before Lazarus dies. Because in the story Lazarus has a name, and the rich man doesn't – he is just called “a rich man”. And in those days if somebody was called by their name in a story, that was a sign of how important they were. Go read through some of the other parables – you'll see that the characters are always referred to as “a farmer”, “a widow”, “a bride”, “a king”, “a rich man”. Hardly ever a character is called by name. So the poor man was so important in the eyes of God, that he gave him a name in the story. And the name *Lazarus* means: *God helps*.

Back to the story: Eventually, both men died. The angels came and carried Lazarus right to Abraham's side. This same person, who never even had a place around a table while he was on earth, now had a place of honour; while the rich man was sent to hell.

So even in death these 2 men were at different sides of a gate, their positions were just reversed now. And even there, in hell, the rich man didn't reach out to Lazarus, but asked Abraham to *send* Lazarus to bring him some water.

But he couldn't. Because that gate, the gate that the rich man shut himself, stayed shut now...

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What if.... What if the rich man reached out to Lazarus? What if he didn't ignore the problem that was right in front of his eyes? His life could have been so different. Not to talk about his death!

In Lazarus God gave the rich man an opportunity, an opportunity to take care of someone, to go beyond what was expected of him in society, by doing something for someone

who wouldn't be able to give anything in return. (Even though that was not the practise at the time and would make his peers frown upon his deeds.) If he grabbed hold of this opportunity, he would have changed not only a poor man's life, but his own life too.

But he didn't. He pretended that Lazarus wasn't there, and he carried on with his life as if nothing was wrong. And eventually, he paid the price for his actions.

The rich man was so busy gathering riches and building his reputation, that he lost sight of the fact that in reality it doesn't matter what you have or what other people think of you – in the end it is only God's opinion about you that matters.

And by only mixing with the "right crowd", the rich man not only shut Lazarus out of his life, but Jesus too – because we read that Jesus spent a lot of time with sinners and toll collectors and prostitutes and the sick and the poor, definitely not the same crowd the rich man entertained in his fancy house.

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Everything boils down to choices. Where are you placed this morning?

Are you entertaining the “in-crowd”, or do you reach out to the outcasts? Do you ignore the elephant in the room, or do you try to solve your problems? Do you walk over others to get things done your way, or do you reach out and give people who need it a hand?

God puts opportunities in our paths every single day, whether that be a Lazarus to reach out to, a friend who needs a listening ear, a family member who needs a shoulder to cry on, a stranger who needs to see a friendly face... It's up to us what we make of these opportunities. We can choose...

The thing is just, that if we choose to keep the gates of our hearts shut, if we keep our love locked up, we might – contrary to what we think we are doing - not be keeping ourselves safe at all.

We *need* other people in our lives. After all, we believers are called the *family* of Christ.

If we build walls around ourselves in times of hardship, bereavement, and pain, we are going to end up sad and alone. No-one will be able to reach out and help carry our burdens.

And even worse – we won't be able to see the hardship around us, the pain in other people's eyes... And then, by thinking that we are just protecting ourselves, we are actually hurting ourselves, and others.

So let's face the dirty looks and the cold shoulders that we'll get if we say and do things differently from the people around us, but by doing that, change the world little by little...

Let's take the risk of getting hurt and being left out, and let the doors of our lives stand wide open. Because if we don't, we might be shutting the gates of heaven in our own faces... And (*speaking literally and metaphorically*) - if you're not in heaven, you're in hell – and who on earth would choose for that?!

Amen

