

Disciples Practice Generosity

Part 4 of Sermon Series:

What Disciples Do

a sermon based on

Luke 16:19-31

and delivered on

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What do disciples do? That's the question for this sermon series? But why? Is our goal to get into Heaven? Or to avoid Hell? Why is that? I hope to go to heaven. I share the gospel – the good news that God loves each soul with such a yearning that he sent his one and only Son so that we can have life. That's my paraphrase of John 3:16, which always needs John 3:17 ““Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” That's important.

That's important because too often Christianity gets portrayed merely as a means of avoiding Hell. That's the Calvinist doctrine of “total depravity.” You deserve Hell – we all do – but we can avoid it by turning to Jesus. There's “some” truth in that. But it is not the sum (S – U – M) or total truth, but merely a fraction. It can only be the “sum” truth if Jesus did condemn the world. But Jesus loves us. That is our truth. It adds up. Not because we have a giant “+” sign on the wall.

In the Gospel lesson today, Jesus tells a story, about a rich man and a man named Lazarus. And this story is filled with irony. It turns expectations upside down. In the contemporary thought of the time, wealth was seen as a sign of blessing – of goodness. Poverty – was seen as a sign of God's contempt. There's immediately something wrong when the rich man experienced torment in Hades, but Lazarus rested in the bosom of Abraham. That's not how works. Is it?

One of the real dangers of the prosperity gospel – is that it preaches that earthly rewards is the sign of God's blessing – by extension the absence of wealth is a sign of God's contempt. The poor wouldn't be poor if they just worked harder – or spent their money more wisely. That's something we still hear today. There are people who bring trouble upon themselves, but they are not the majority. There are people working two part-time jobs (because employers want to avoid making them full-time) who lack health insurance and who depend on food stamps. We do know that 80% of food stamp recipients have jobs, right?¹

What I'm getting at is this: that wasn't just how people – even good people – thought about it back then, but that it persists today. If it didn't why is it that we see signs and bumper stickers for sale that remind us that “He who dies with the most toys wins”? Jesus upsets this with the story of the rich man and Lazarus.

Here's something to ponder. Nowhere in the story does Jesus suggest that the rich man was wicked. We merely hear that he had plenty and enjoyed the benefits of his wealth and power. (We know he was powerful because of the purple robes. Roman law was very particular about who could wear purple.) We're not told that he was a cheat or that he abused Lazarus.

As to Lazarus, how righteous was he? We don't know. That's not what concerns Jesus here.

Maybe that's because he'd just finished addressing the Pharisees and their love of money. But it's a common theme. Later in Luke (Lk 18:18-30) we hear the story of the young ruler who asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus directs him to the commandments: do not steal, do not murder, etc. When the man confirms that he has kept these commandments, Jesus tells him he lacks one thing, and directs him to sell what he had and to give it to the poor. And he left sad because he was “very rich.” Notice Jesus didn't condemn him for being rich. Instead he offered him an opportunity to put his wealth to good use.

So let's go back to the story that Jesus tells about this rich man (whose name we don't know) and poor, pathetic Lazarus (whose name means “one who has been helped”). The rich man is buried. His body is cast into the ground. Lazarus is carried away by angels into the arms of Abraham. The rich man can see Lazarus. He even knows his name.

Ironically he pleads with Abraham to allow Lazarus – of all people – to bring him a drink to ease his torment, Lazarus who would have been satisfied merely to have eaten the rich man's garbage. Those bread crumbs under the table – the ones that belong to the dogs – were garbage.

¹ <https://www.cbpp.org/research/policy-basics-introduction-to-the-supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap> (accessed September 29, 2019)

They were the remnants used to wipe the grease from plates so that they could be cleaned, and were left for the dogs. So this man who wouldn't even share his garbage with Lazarus, when even the dogs did more for him by licking his wounds, asks for help. Did you catch that? Lazarus means "one who has been helped." In effect, the rich man is asking to be Lazarus. But it's too late. When he realizes that, he asks Abraham to send Lazarus back to tell his brothers so that they can be spared.

But they already knew, didn't they? "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them." (Lk 16:29) Moses said, "(D)o not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor." (Deut. 15:7) The prophet Isaiah speaking the word of the Lord said:

Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin? (Isa. 58:6-7)

In the story that Jesus tells, we are reminded that finding our place in the kingdom of heaven isn't merely about avoiding evil. It's not about being – what so many call – a "good person." What does that mean, "I'm a good person."?

Jesus calls us to share what we have. He doesn't disparage us for having it. I want to make that clear. He didn't scold the rich young ruler for having wealth. He encouraged him to share it. Even that passage from 1 Timothy that we heard earlier and is so often misquoted as "money is the root of all evil" or only slightly better as "the *love* of money is the root of all evil," doesn't say money is bad, merely that attachment can lead us to all sorts of woes.

I feel like I've spent too much time on the negative here, instead of offering good news. But there is good news here. There's good news whether your flush or scraping by. The good news is that God loves you regardless of how fortunate you are or aren't. He does. He loves you because he made you in his image. Think about that for a moment. In Genesis 2:7, we hear, "then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being." We came into being because God shared his breath – God shared his Spirit – with a creature. Who we are as human beings rests on God's generous gift of himself. Think about that. If that's God's nature – to share, then as those made in his image it must be in our nature, as well.

Today we have a chance to be generous; to share what we have - in proportion to what we have not what we don't have. Today we have a chance to consider how we can more fully live out God's love through our generosity. One way is by how we give to the church. It's only one way, but it is an important way. We get a choice about it. In some other countries the Church receives money from taxes. We on the other hand, actually have the privilege of deciding to support the work of the church in the world so that others can know the love of Jesus and become more generous in their own lives. So as you present your estimate of giving card with the offering – or even as you continue to prayerfully consider it, this is only the beginning of our discipleship.

As disciples who may be fortunate enough to dine out, we have the opportunity to be generous with those who wait on us. As disciples whose hearts ache for those afflicted by one disease or another, we have the opportunity to be generous and to know that we have a part in either a cure or relief. As disciples who remember that Jesus stopped what he was doing to play with children

and to eat with the poor, we have the opportunity to be generous with our time and our very being. As disciples we have been blessed to receive this great knowledge now, when there's time to help Lazarus, and still time to claim eternal life not just in the then to come, but in the now.

Disciples practice generosity, because it's who we were made to be and it's how we unleash life. AMEN.