

Sunday June 6th, 2021

Luke 16:19-31

Series: People We All Need in our Lives

Sermon: "We All Need VIPs"

A bit of recent history to begin today. Wednesday, November 4th 2015, provided a spectacle of sorts. Justin Pierre James Trudeau was officially sworn in as our new Prime Minister. I saw the news reports that evening, and what I saw at Rideau Hall was something I do not think I have ever seen before. Hundreds of people lined up to get a chance to enter the Governor General's residence to catch a glimpse of the new Prime Minister, and I guess to some extent, his new cabinet.

In the midst of CBC's extensive coverage, one reporter was interviewing people lined up outside the gate waiting to get in. One group of four students from Montreal told the reporter they had left Montreal at 4am to be first in line to get into the grounds. When asked when was the last time they got up at 4am for anything, they could not think of any time they had done something similar. Our new Prime Minister it seems has reached some new level of celebrity status.

Besides the events that transpired at Rideau Hall, several times in the news coverage, reference was made to the upcoming legislative session, and the priorities of the new government. One item in particular had garnered a lot of attention. Prime Minister Trudeau is anxious to get the tax relief measure for the middle-class enacted before the New Year. The ramifications of the new tax measure is that the wealthiest one percent of Canadians will be taxed higher.

This has caused a backlash, as the Toronto Star reported on Thursday November 5th in Desmond Cole's column. Many wealthy Canadians are incensed that they will have to pay more, when they already pay considerable taxes. One man is quoted as saying that this new tax measure is unfair, for punishing those who work hard. The man quoted by the way earned \$800,000 dollars last year and paid \$340,000 in income tax.

I find it interesting that what is missing in this debate, is the cold hard fact that statistically the middle class is disappearing. It is shrinking dramatically. Leonard Sweet, at the Lester Randall Preaching conference several years ago, made the point that there is a monumental shift under way in our society that will affect every aspect of our society and the church. We tend to think of things as on a sort of bell curve.

You remember a bell curve from your school days. A bell curve starts out low and raises into a bell shape and then drops off. Bell curves were valuable tools, because they described the fact that the majority of whatever you are measuring, fell into the high curve of the bell. The middle of the curve, the middle-class for example. The bell curve no longer applies to our world, and particularly in western nations. We now live in a well-curve world. A world where the ends are high and there is a deep well or valley in the middle.

And so, in our world, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, and the middle class is disappearing. But it applies to other things as well. Houses being built now are either very big or very tiny, like the tiny house movement. On a social level it is even more pronounced. No one wants to be ordinary anymore, or middle of the road.

Sunday June 6th, 2021

No one wants to go unnoticed. We tend to “go big or go home.” Portia de Rossi said, “Average. It was the worst, most disgusting word in the English language. Nothing meaningful or worthwhile ever came from that word.” Criss Jami notes that “Normality is the new eccentric.” Constance Friday said, “Average is not the best leverage” For you, baseball fans among us, do you remember the time the Yankees played in Toronto 2010s? What happened every time Alex Rodriguez of the Yankees came to the plate?

He got booed. When asked about how he felt about that he replied that Reggie Jackson the Hall of famer and former Yankee told him, “They don’t boo nobodies.” Our whole culture seems determined to live on the edges, and the edges are getting further apart all the time. I think it is profoundly prophetic that Jesus gave us the parable before us today from Luke 16. It is a unique parable for several reasons, but mostly because it is the only parable where a person is named.

Mind you the rich man is not named, but the poor man is; he is named Lazarus, but not the same Lazarus that was brother to Mary and Martha. He is simply a character in the parable. The parable seems so straight forward. There was a rich man who lived in the lap of luxury. We might say he was in the top 1 percent of his day. And then there was the poor man Lazarus, who took to laying on the rich man’s door step begging for scraps.

Lazarus’ situation is described as being extremely pathetic. He was weak, he was sick (The dogs would come and lick Lazarus’ sores). These two men were on the fringes; the ends of the “well-curve” as I described. There is no middle ground here, at least in terms of economics. Now the parable tells us that both men died about the same time. Lazarus was taken to heaven to the “bosom of Abraham”. In other words, to be comforted.

The rich man was sent to the place of the dead, called Sheol, where he lived in torment. The rich man, although separated by a great chasm, can see Lazarus being comforted, and he calls out to Abraham, and asked that Lazarus simply dip his finger in water, and touch his tongue to cool its tip. Abraham tells him this is not possible, and that the rich man and Lazarus have both received their just reward.

Out of desperation, the rich man asks that Lazarus be sent to his father and brothers to warn them to mend their ways (This is kind of like Charles Dicken’s “A Christmas Carol”). Abraham tells him this is also not possible; besides they have Moses and the other prophets who have warned them to care for the poor. Besides, if they won’t listen to Moses or the other prophets, what makes you think they will listen to a man raised from the dead?

What a tragic story, and an immensely frightening one. But here is the question the parable prompts for us today in our society. What actually was the rich man’s sin? Why did he end up in eternal torment? Well, first of all, let’s declare out right what was not his sin. His wealth was not his sin. After all, Abraham was an incredibly wealthy man in his day, and here he is in heaven. Wealth may be a slippery slope if not managed well, in terms of our spiritual lives. but it is not a sin to have money.

A lack of generosity can be a sin, and that has some influence in this passage, but is that what really condemned the rich man?

Sunday June 6th, 2021

Consider that when those in poverty dream of a better life what do they dream about? Getting rich. Today, many people dream of winning the lottery, or a rich relative dying and leaving them great gobs of money. The reason the poor do not rise up against the rich, is often because they aspire to join them. Leonard Sweet writes that to attack the rich is to attack the dreams of the poor. Interesting thought. Very few people dream about being in the middle class. We may be content there, but often we want to rise about the middle.

As Bruce Cockburn so eloquently sung, “There must be more”. The early church depended on rich folks to flourish. Barnabus, Lydia, and others: generously supported the apostles and their missionary endeavors. So being rich was not what condemned the man in the parable. What condemned the rich man was that he had no relationship with Lazarus. His dogs spent more time with him than he did.

The image is stark. In the parable, the rich man, or anyone else in the house, would have to literally step over Lazarus to get inside the mansion. The scraps Lazarus received were likely dog food; table scraps for the hounds. The rich man never took the time to talk to Lazarus, learn his story, let Lazarus minister to him as much as he was ministered to. Leonard Sweet makes a good point when he talks about homeless shelters.

“Ask anyone who heads up a homeless shelter or an inner-city rescue mission. They will tell you the same number one frustration. It isn’t that the rich don’t “visit” or “support” their ministry. The rich write checks and “visit” the poor all the time. It’s that the rich don’t know the poor or become friends with the poor. Rather we treat the poor as anonymous recipients of charity rather than engage them as equals.” (11 Indispensable Relationships, p. 192)

In the early church there was a ginormous social upheaval under way demonstrated by the agape feast or love feast, which was immediately followed by the Lord’s Supper.” This sharing of food and communion was profound, because around the table sat rich and poor, men and women, young and old. There was no regard for social status. In most feasts of that day, there were seats of honor, but not at the Lord’s Supper.

Reread 1 Corinthians 11 to see the concern Paul has for the direction the Love Feast was going in this church. He writes,

“It’s not the Lord’s Supper you are concerned about when you come together. For I am told that some of you hurry to eat your own meal without sharing with others. As a result, some go hungry while others get drunk. What is this really true? Do you have your own homes for eating and drinking? Or do you really want to disgrace the church of God and shame the poor? What am I supposed to say about these things? Do you want me to praise you? Well, I certainly do not!”

The parable is also convicting for its portrayal of the afterlife. As I have argued, there was a chasm between the rich man and Lazarus in this life. They did not have a relationship. Notice that after they die their remains a chasm. The fracture between them remains for eternity. Could it be that the quality of our relationships does have an impact on our eternities? If so, then we need to take seriously our relationships with all people.

Sunday June 6th, 2021

So, if our culture is changing into a well-curve as Sweet suggests, what might the church's response be? Could it be that our call includes a mandate to bring the two ends together? To begin around the Lord's Table, and carry out into the world our Lord's desire for all people to connect with one another in healthy, mutually beneficial relationships. How many of you are familiar with the Greek word *Logos*?

It appears in the Gospel of John at the very beginning, it describes Jesus as "the Logos became flesh and dwelt among us". Logos is often translated into English as "word", and this is a tragedy. It is a much richer word that describes so much more than mere grammar. Recently a manuscript fragment was found telling a story from the life of the Greek Philosopher Heraclitus, who is the first known person to use the word Logos. (L. Sweet at Randal Preaching conference, 02/11/15)

In the fragment, one of Heraclitus' students asks for a definition of the word logos. He tells the student to go and get a stick, then a second stick, and then a string of catgut. Then he explains that logos can make the two sticks into something that destroys or something that heals. He takes one stick and stings the two ends together bending the stick so it forms a –bow. They he takes that other and pretends to shoot an arrow which can kill.

They he takes the bow, raises it up to his shoulder and using the other stick he draws it across the catgut making sound. In other words, music, which can heal. The logos is the catgut, bringing the ends together and giving the sticks new meaning. The Logos, the presence of God, is abiding in Christ's church to bring the two ends together. Bring the rich and the poor, men and women, young and old, together, and giving us new meaning.

That meaning being that we are the body of Christ. The world may see its people as separated. We see people as being in the one percent or the depths of poverty. We are tempted to condemn the rich and pity the poor, but strive to remain in the middle. Christ is not in the middle; he is in it all. Christ is on the fringe as well as the heart. Christ endeavors to turn our categories of separation into paths of reconciliation and fellowship.

"The first shall be last", "suffer the little children unto me", Jesus is a "friend of sinners" In the demonstration of Heraclitus we see that the middle must bend to accommodate the ends. One wonders how malleable we are in the hands of God. Can we truly be shaped into the people he wants us to be? Can we recognize, as the early church did, that communion table is not ours, it is our Lord's Table? He is the one who invites and welcomes.

Tony Campolo was in Port-au-Prince Haiti, checking out the missionary work his organization undertakes with World Vision. It was a long day and he was very tired. It was with great relief that he found a good French restaurant and sat down to enjoy a good meal. Campolo chose a window seat so he could enjoy watching the hustle and bustle of the city while he ate. The waiter brought a delicious looking meal and sat it down in front of him.

He was just about to dig in, when he looked to his right at the window and noticed four street urchins with their noses pressed against the window. Four of the thousands of children starving

Sunday June 6th, 2021

on the streets of Port-au-Prince. The waiter seeing Campolo's distress quickly moved over and pulled down the shade.

Then he said, "Don't let them bother you. Enjoy your meal." Campolo states, "As if I could!" Then he goes on to make the point that that is what we all do. We pull down the shade. We blot out the unsightliness of poverty. We do not want it to interrupt our banquets. We pretend they are not there. (Stories that Feed Your Soul, p.105) But they are there, noses pressed to the glass, wanting to be invited in. Invited in not just to eat, but to participate.

To be seen as equals. We are called on to rub shoulders with all of God's children. As John King of Riverside Church in Peoria Illinois writes, "Serve the poor and the rich will come." Are we God's catgut? Are we drawing the diverse ends of society together? Is the Logos, transforming us? If not, then why not?